BY THE AUTHOR OF LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET

JUST AS I AM

LONDON: J. & R. MAXWELL

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JUST AS I AM

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

'LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET,' 'AURORA FLOYD,'

ETC.

Stereotyped Edition

LONDON

JOHN AND ROBERT MAXWELL

MILTON HOUSE, SHOE LANE, FLEET STREET

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JUST AS I AM.

CHAPTER I.

EVERY DOG HAS HIS DAY.

An autumn evening, with a biting north wind, and the sun going down redly behind the oaks of Blatchmardean Park. A winding road, with a coppice on one side, and a steep bank topped by a straggling hedge where the blackberry leaves are still green, while the hips and haws offer a feast for the birds, on the other. A desolate bit of road, remote from human habitation; no glimmer of fire-lit cottage window in the distance; no gray smoke-wreaths curling up above the wood. It is only a mile and a quarter from here to the village of Austhorpe, yet the belated traveller might fancy himself far from all possibility of shelter.

A solitary figure cowering under the hedge, with a vagabond dog crouching close at its side, enhances rather than lessens the solitude of the scene. There is something desolate and dreary in that gaunt figure, clad in an old smock-frock, patched with such various shades of stuff, as almost to rival Joseph's coat of many colours. The wayfarer is elderly and grim-looking. He has long grizzled hair, and a weather-beaten complexion, hollow cheeks, and haggard eyes. Every line in his rugged face tells of privation that has gone near to famine. The dog has the same gaunt frame and hungry look, as he sits watching his master gnawing a mouldy crust which he has just extracted from the blue cotton handkerchief that holds all his worldly gear.

The hungry master gnaws, and the hungry mongrel envies, wagging his poor stump of a tail ever and anon in mute supplication, once or twice bursting into a tremulous whine. His owner looks at him dubiously, out of a corner of his eye, and at last, with a reluctant air, relinquishes his grip upon the crust, and tosses the remaining fragment to the cur.

'A bite for him, and a bite for me,' growls the vagabond. 'There ain't a jail in England where I shouldn't get a better supper than I can get as a free man. "Liberty's sweet," says some folks. Not for starving stomachs, says I. Liberty's bitter, when it only means you're free to starve and rot—as we are—eh, Tim?'

Tim stands on end, and licks the wanderer's face. It is only a dog's tongue, but the most loving salute Humphrey Vargas is likely to get in this life.

Vargas picks himself up stiffly, for he is sixty years old, and tired and footsore, from the bank where he has been sitting on a cushion of fallen leaves, and begins to look about him in the gray dusk.

'Why, if it ain't the blessed spot!' he exclaims. There's the pollard oak—and the pool just inside the hedge—and there's the path across the copse yonder to Blatchmardean. No mistake about it. This is the spot. Twenty year ago, to-day—twenty year ago—and it all comes back to me as if it was yesterday. I'm not much of a one to remember days and years, but I shall never forget that day, nor that year, nor this place.'

He clambered up the bank, and looked about him, peering through the dusk, across the meadows yonder, with their tangled hedges and tall timber—an old-fashioned picturesque landscape, neither improved nor disfigured by high farming. On the other side of the narrow road—for this village of Austhorpe was off the king's highway, a hamlet approached by rustic lanes—there was only the mysterious darkness of the wood.

'I know that there pollarded oak, and I can swear to that there bit of water,' said Vargas. 'I've seen the place too often in my dreams to forget it when I'm awake. And now, come on, Tim. You and me are going to sleep under a roof to-night. Ah, lad, though I don't know about you. Maybe they'll refuse to take you in, old chap; but we'll try to work it, we'll try to work it, Tim.'

He shouldered his stick, and trudged on resolutely.

'Hardly over a mile,' he muttered to himself, 'I can do that.'

The dog crawled by his side dead lame. Vargas would have been lamer than the cur but for that power of will which made the man a little higher than the dog. The lane was lonely enough for the first half-mile, then came a solitary cottage, on a knoll above the road-way, with its row of beehives against the darkling sky, and its cheerful fire-glow shining across the lane; then a couple of cottages together, little better than hovels, but suggestive of warmth and comfort to the wanderer who had no shelter; then more cottages, four in a row, substantial, respectable dwellings, with a century old date upon their rough-cast front, latticed casements, sloping thatched roofs, with a dormer window in each that looked like an eye under a penthouse brow. Here

again was the comfortable fire-glow shining through lattice and half-open door, a glimpse of rustic luxury inside—a neatly swept hearth, a singing kettle, a little round table with cups and saucers, all twinkling in the firelight, and a big brown loaf.

Far away, at the end of a long lane of vanished years, Vargas saw the picture of just such a cottage interior, and himself coming home to it, a respectable member of society, earning his sixteen shillings a week manfully, and keeping a wife and five children. He remembered the flaxen heads and rosy cheeks in the ruddy light of the wood fire—the snugness of the cottage, at sixpence a week, with a patch of potato ground, and half-a-dozen apple trees behind it.

'Was that contented, respectable chap *me?*' he asked himself wonderingly.

Here are the lights of Austhorpe. Not many or brilliant. A feeble ray from the village shop—a glimmer in the schoolhouse windows—a cheery light shining through the red curtain at the 'Sugar Loaves Inn,' where three wooden sugar-loaves, pendent from the sign-post in the road, are swinging in the north-east wind. A light yonder from the lodge window by the gate of Fairview, Sir Everard Courtenay's place.

Vargas stood and looked up and down the village street—if that could be called a street which was verily a wide open road, with a farmhouse on one side, a few scattered cottages on the other, further on a pond, and half-a-dozen more cottages, culminating in a shop at a corner opposite the schoolhouse, and beyond that, facing down the road, which here turned off at a sharp angle, the village inn, with its three sugar-loaves groaning and creaking in the wind.

The church, an old stone barn—which looked as if it had been begun without any definite idea, and abandoned by an architect who did not know how to finish it—stood apart in the midst of fields, and had altogether an accidental air.

Vargas knew the place as well as he knew himself, though it was twenty years to-night since he had set foot on that quiet road. He saw that an old cottage or two which he remembered had tumbled down, or disappeared somehow, and that a couple of new cottages had been built. He saw the sugar-loaves swinging as they had swung above his head many a time on summer evenings when he had stood among the village *quidnuncs* settling the fate of empires. The red curtain had faded a little, perhaps ; there was a stout limb lopped from one of the three tall poplars ; but the old house had the same air of thrift and prosperity as of yore.

Humphrey Vargas explored the bottom of his breeches pockets with careful fingers, in the faint hope of finding a forgotten penny. But those pockets were positively empty. There was no

delusion. Bite nor sup, save from charity or official relief, was not for Humphrey to-night.

'I'll do it,' he muttered to himself between his set teeth. 'It's the last move left to me. I shall be locked up for life, but I shall have bread to eat, and a roof to cover me, and my poor old bones won't ache as they ache to-night. Yes,' he ejaculated with an oath, 'I'll do it.'

He went as far as the 'Sugar-Loaves,' crept close up to the window, and peeped in through a crack in the crimson curtain. A man was sitting by the fire smoking a long clay pipe. Two more sat apart at a table drinking beer. A creature who looked little better than a tramp lay asleep, stretched full-length upon a bench by the white-washed wall, but an empty plate and mug on the table beside him showed that he had patronized the house before he took his rest, and a well-filled bundle, which served as a pillow for his touzled head, indicated his claim to be considered a respectable member of society.

The picture, humble as it was—a sanded floor, deal tables, kitchen fireplace—filled Vargas with envy.

He went in at the open door. The landlord was sitting in his snug bar, reading yesterday's paper.

'Who's the magistrate hereabouts, mate?' asked Vargas.

'You'd better keep out of his way,' answered the landlord. 'He's a mark on tramps.'

'You just keep your advice till you're asked for it,' growled Vargas. 'I want to know the magistrate's name, and where I can find him. That's all I want.'

'I suppose you are going to give yourself in charge,' said the landlord ironically.

'I am.'

'You'd better go and tell that to the marines, my friend. Our magistrate is Sir Everard Courtenay, the owner of Fairview. You will see the lodge-gate at the end of the street. There isn't a finer gentleman in the county, nor one that's kinder to his tenants and servants; but he's as hard as nails when it comes to such cattle as you.'

'I ain't afraid of him,' answered Vargas. 'Oh, I say, landlord, d'ye happen to know anyone as wants a dawg?'

'That depends on circumstances. If the dog's a good bred 'un, handsome, and well edicated, and to be had for nothing, I might find you a customer.'

'The dog ain't handsome, but he's as true as steel,' replied Vargas, 'and you may have him for——' he was going to say for nothing, but changed his mind—'for a mug of beer.'

And here he held Timothy aloft by the scruff of his neck, and exhibited the cur to the landlord and a friendly lounger.

They both saluted Tim's perfections with a loud guffaw.

'Thank you,' said the landlord. 'I appreciate the offer, but my conscience wouldn't let me rob you of such a valuable specimint. Keep him agen the next dog show ; or p'r'aps the Prince o' Wales might like to continoo the breed.'

'You may chaff,' growled Vargas, 'but you don't know what you're refusing. There never was such a dog for sense and affection. He's the best house dog in England.'

'Did you ever try him ?' asked the lounger, who considered himself the village wit. 'Had you ever a house ?'

'Yes,' snapped Vargas, 'but not so big a one as you ought to okipy.'

'Indeed !'

'The county asylum's about the fit for you, seeing that natur has entitled you to a place in the idiot ward.'

'Thank you,' said the lounger, with an air of saying something crushing. 'If I was the heditor of a comic paper I should ask you to communicate again !'

'Then you won't have the dawg, landlord ?' pleaded Vargas, with a piteous look, first at Tim, and then at the prosperous over-fed host.

'Not unless I had him stuffed for a scarecrow,' said the landlord ; 'so now, my man, you'd better sheer off. Customers of your quality ain't in request at the "Sugar-Loaves." Their favours is not solicited.'

The man muttered a curse, and turned on his heel.

'Better in jail than out for such as me—better underground than above it.'

He crawled slowly back again, by the way he had come, to the other end of the village.

CHAPTER II.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

Fairview was one of those places which suggest at a glance old-established respectability and a long line of ancestry, a race that has taken deep root in the soil. It was not a grand house, or a show house. It had a snug and even homely air, as of a house meant to withstand the ravages of time and weather rather than to show off its architectural beauty under an Italian sky. It was a Tudor house, with heavy mullioned windows, huge central chimney stacks, and many gables. It was a long, low house, with a broad terrace in front of it, and below the terrace a stiff Italian garden, with a round pond and fountain in the middle, and beyond the garden a fair expanse of undulating green sward, richly timbered. The pond and the fountain were

as old as the house, and the gold fish that splashed about in the water were popularly supposed to be of the same date, and to have seen Queen Elizabeth, when she spent a night at Fairview, in one of her royal progresses. There were people of a radical turn of mind who disbelieved in Queen Elizabeth's visit to Fairview; but there was the old carved oak bedstead, which had been set up for her especial accommodation, and there were the cramoisy satin curtains, faded to a dull brick-dust hue, which had sheltered her august person from the night air.

Time had toned down every colour inside and outside the good old house to mellowest half-tints. Brick and stone had assumed all those varying shades of purple and gray, red and brown, which time and the lichen tribe give to old houses. There had been no restoration or renovation, but all things had been kept in exquisite order from the beginning of time; for the Courtenays were one of the most respectable families in the county. Nobody had ever been able to say that the Courtenay estate was 'dipped.' No one had ever hinted at an undue felling of timber. The small park, or chase, as Sir Everard preferred to call it, could boast some of the finest trees within fifty miles. The home farm was a model of advanced farming, every cow a picture, every carthorse worthy of a prize medal. Even the pigs were the aristocracy of the porker tribe.

The Courtenays were not among the wealthiest of the land, but they had never been poor. That was their great merit. From the time when Jasper Courtenay, the lawyer, chosen companion and favourite of Francis Bacon, bought the old monastic lands of Fairview for a song, till this present day, there had been no reprobate or prodigal to tarnish the family shield or to diminish the estate. These Courtenays, a younger branch of a good old Devonian family tree, had thriven and flourished in their Daleshire home. They had married always respectably, sometimes profitably. They had affected the graver professions, and had won fame in the Senate and on the Bench, rather than in the more adventurous careers of soldier or sailor. They had been men of considerable culture, handing down a certain pride and stateliness of mind and mien from sire to son, as if it had been a tangible heritage. They had for the most part married late in life, and had not left large families. And now the race of the Fairview Courtenays had dwindled to two persons, Sir Everard Courtenay and his only child, Dulcibella, otherwise and always known as Dulcie.

To-night, while the north-east wind was stripping off the ruddy beech leaves, and bending the long level branches of the cedars, the low-ceiled, panelled parlour at the end of the house, looking out upon dark shrubberies, was the picture of homely old-fashioned comfort. It was Dulcie's room, the room where she

studied with governess and masters during the studious period of her life, and where she was now sovereign mistress, free to improve each shining hour, like the bees, or to waste her time, like the butterflies, just as inclination prompted. The old furniture had been enlivened by various modern luxuries and elegancies in accordance with Dulcie's taste. The black oak chimney-piece presented a kaleidoscopic variety of colour. Pots and pans, cups and saucers, and platters of Dulcie's painting or Dulcie's purchasing, gleamed from the sombre old woodwork, enriched with many a garland and festoon by the chisels of dead and gone carvers. There were two old ebony cabinets crowded with toys and crockery of Dulcie's collecting. The chair-covers were of Dulcie's working, and blossomed all over with woodland and meadow flowers on a drab ground, for she was as dexterous with needle as with pencil. Here, in front of the broad square window, stood Dulcie's piano, a modern antique in ebony and brass, Sir Everard's last New Year's gift to a daughter for whom he deemed nothing too beautiful or too costly. Two pictures and two only, adorned the dark, dull walls—one the portrait of Dulcie's mother, the other a striking likeness of Sir Everard Courtenay at nine and twenty years of age. He was now fifty.

In front of the wide old fireplace, where the logs were burning merrily, stood a little gimcrack table, and on the table a silver kettle, and quaint Japanese tea service, all red and yellow. Dulcie had been making afternoon tea for her father and a visitor; and now tea was over, and her father was sitting in the big arm-chair on one side of the hearth, with the visitor opposite, while Dulcie herself sat on a low stool in front of the blaze, which glittered and sparkled upon the pale gold of her wavy hair. She sat looking at the fire with her lovely blue eyes, the bluest and sweetest eyes that Morton Blake had ever looked upon. This was her twentieth birthday, but the girlishness of her slender form, and the childlike innocence of her countenance, gave the impression of extreme youth. A stranger would have thought Dulcie at most sixteen. Her life had been so sheltered and protected, so free from worldly care and all the hard bitter knowledge which worldly care brings with it, that the passing years had left no impression on the fair young face. She was as frank and girlish in mind and manner as she had been seven years ago in her nursery. Time had brought her new graces and accomplishments without taking from her this supreme grace of childlike simplicity.

This was her birthday, and she was spending it quietly and gravely, sitting at the feet of the father who idolized her, and whose love she returned in fullest measure. There was a reason why Dulcie's birthday should never be marked by festivity or rejoicing of any kind. It was the saddest day of the year

for Sir Everard Courtenay, for close upon the stroke of midnight on that never-to-be-forgotten twentieth of October, and within an hour of her baby's birth, his young wife had died.

They had been married little more than a year. Lady Courtenay had been one of the belles of the county, the daughter of a duke's younger son, and a bishop's portionless niece, with no fortune but her lovely face and richly gifted nature. Sir Everard had won her against a host of rivals, and he had been an adoring husband. And after little more than a year of wedded happiness, sunshine without a cloud, as those judged who had best known husband and wife, death had snatched her from him, and he had been left alone in a blank and desolate world, for at this time he counted the baby daughter as nothing.

'He will marry again,' said Society, as represented by the parents of marriageable daughters. 'So good-looking and in the prime of life. Of course he will marry again. It would be absolutely sinful if he didn't.'

Sir Everard disappointed Society, and especially the mothers of attractive daughters, by leaving England the day after his wife's funeral. He led a roving life in the wildest part of Europe for the next seven years, while Dulcibella was waxing lovely and sagacious under the care of a married aunt in a far-away Welsh vicarage; and then he came home all of a sudden and went to look at his daughter.

She was a childish image of his dead wife, and that set his wounded heart bleeding afresh; but she was so fair and so loving that he grew by degrees to find comfort in her innocent companionship, and after spending an idle summer among the Welsh hills, whipping romantic waters for trout, reading and brooding in fair solitudes, he said one day—

'Dulcie, we'll go home, and you shall keep house for me, and make my life happy.'

He carried out this plan to the letter. The seven-year-old baby was practically mistress of Fairview. The life he lived was the life Dulcie liked. His garden, his stables, his hothouses, all were regulated to please that girlish fancy. The servants were referred to Dulcie for orders. Dulcie had a governess, and governed the governess. If the child had been of a selfish disposition she would have grown up an execrable tyrant. But as she had a nature of inexhaustible sweetness she only grew preternaturally grave and wise, with a childish old-fashionedness that was delightful. And so she grew, and flourished, and blossomed under her father's eye, growing nearer to his heart every day, learning every accomplishment that could minister to his pleasure, soothing him when he was weary, amusing him when he was inclined to be gay, reading to him, writing his letters

when he was lazy, nursing him when he was ill, more devoted than one wife in a hundred or one daughter in a thousand.

They lived very much by themselves, this father and daughter, mixing in county society only so far as they were obliged. Sir Everard liked to be alone, and Dulcie liked whatever he liked. They went abroad together every summer, and all the rest of the year they lived in the good old house, of which Dulcie never tired. The quiet winter evenings by the fireside, with book, or drawing-board, work or music, never wearied her. To be with her father was perfect happiness, and who need seek variety in perfect happiness.

She and her father had the same tastes, the same inclinations. They both loved art and music, they both had a passion for books.

There were books everywhere at Fairview—books in every variety of rich, and sombre, and delicate binding—Sir Everard and his daughter were connoisseurs in binding—books in their homely cloth or paper covers, waiting promotion upon merits. Dulcibella had read much and wisely for a young woman of twenty ; but not all the books in the Bodleian would ever have made Dulcie strong-minded or 'blue.' Culture left her simple and natural as a child who had never learned its alphabet. Culture with Dulcie meant, verily, sweetness and light.

Of late there had been one very constant visitor at Fairview, a visitor who now ranked almost as member of the family. This was Morton Blake, of Tangley Manor, who had met Dulcibella two years ago at a flower show and fallen in love with her on the spot. At least this was what he told her six months afterwards, when after meeting her everywhere she went, and calling at Fairview as often as he decently could, he asked her to be his wife.

Dulcie told her father of this offer, and confessed her willingness to accept it, as freely as she had told him her every thought and fancy hitherto ; but for the first time in her life she found that indulgent father opposed to her. He would not hear of Morton Blake as a husband for his daughter. He had no specific objection to offer to the match. The man was fairly well born, very well bred, good looking, well off. Sir Everard could only say, 'He is not the man I should choose for you. If you wish to please me you will not marry Morton Blake.'

For a daughter who so loved, and had been so beloved, this expression of a father's desire was enough.

'Then I shall not marry him, dear father,' she said, and she never more mentioned Blake's name, though he contrived to force himself upon her presence several times, and urged his suit with passion and persistence. But the father saw his child's cheek grow pale, and her eye hollow. He saw a hundred signs and

tokens, not willingly betrayed, of growing unhappiness ; and one evening, when they had been sitting by the fire for a long time in pensive silence, he drew Dulcie on to his knee and turned the sweet sad face towards the lamplight.

'My dearest pet, you are unhappy,' he said.

'It's nothing, papa. It will pass away.'

'My own dear love, answer me truly. Does the happiness of your life hang upon this marriage with Morton Blake?'

She trembled slightly, and turned deadly pale, but she answered as honestly and fearlessly as she had answered her father's every question hitherto :

'I'm afraid it does, father. I have tried to forget him ; I have tried to put the thought of him out of my life. But I can't do it.'

'Then you shall marry him,' said Sir Everard.

CHAPTER III.

AFTER TWENTY YEARS.

'You shall marry him,' said Sir Everard ; so Morton and Dulcibella were engaged ; the fair, flower-like girl, and the dark-eyed, grave young man, full of the sense of life's duties and responsibilities ; a man who from boyhood upwards had taken life earnestly, and had cared little for pleasure.

'Strange,' said the honourable Mrs. Aspinall, of Aspinall Towers, who was the leading voice in the chorus of county society. 'I remember Mr. Blake's father being among Alice Rothney's admirers, but Lord George would not hear of such a thing, and the mother was equally opposed to it.'

'Poor Lady Courtenay!' sighed Mrs. Aspinall's visitor, young Mrs. Kibble, a struggling curate's wife, who only knew of these great people by hearsay. 'She was very lovely, was she not?'

'Lovely,' cried Mrs. Aspinall, 'we don't see such beauty now-a-days. These young persons whose photographs obtrude themselves upon us everywhere are mere dolls in comparison. Girls had very little help from dress in my time, Mrs. Kibble. There were no wrigglings and twistings of the figure, to show off the set of a train, no side glances under Devonshire hats, no twisting of a handsome throat to sniff a rose pinned on the shoulder, no posturing behind big fans. A young woman's gown was cut straight up and down like a flour sack, she had a bit of lace round her shoulders that was called a bertha, she had a camellia stuck in her hair, and she walked with her feet on the ground, instead of balancin' herself upon a three-inch heel, a corn, and a

bunion as girls do now-a-days. Some young women wore pink, and some wore blue, and a great many more wore white. If there was a girl dressed in yaller people stared at her. And that was a ball-room.'

'How uninteresting!' said Mrs. Kibble, who had been plotting and planning for the last week how to do up her cheap black silk with Nottingham lace in the exact style of Mrs. Aspinall's last confection from Worth.

'And in such a gown as that Alice Rothney was the cynosure of every eye. Yes, Blake was desperately in love with her. He was a widower with three children, belonging to the mercantile classes, only one generation removed from a foundry, not at all the kind of man that Lord George Rothney would be likely to approve of as a husband for his beautiful daughter. There were three daughters I believe, but neither of the sisters could compare with Alice.'

'Did the young lady care for him?' asked Mrs. Kibble, deeply interested, and gratified that Mrs. Aspinall should condescend to talk so much, her duty calls at the Towers being generally of an up-hill character.

'Of course not. Alice was an arrant flirt, and knew her own value. She led on Blake, as she led others on, and then accepted Sir Everard Courtenay, and laughed at her admirers. She cared no more for breaking hearts than you care for breaking eggs when you make a puddin', concluded Mrs. Aspinall, taking for granted that the curate's wife did make puddings.

The Blakes belonged to the mercantile classes. This no doubt was the reason why Sir Everard Courtenay, who had much pride of race, had opposed his daughter's marriage with Morton. Geoffrey Blake, Morton's grandfather, had made his money at Blackford, the big manufacturing town within thirty miles of Austhorpe. He had come up from the north, a penniless youth, with his clothes in a small deal box, and an invention for improving upon the existing method of smelting ore in his head. It had been hard work for him to get any one to hear of his new process, harder still to get it adopted, hardest of all to get it recognised as his, and to get rewarded for it. But there was a vein of doggedness in the Blake family that made them conquerors in every struggle, and Geoffrey Blake pegged along the hard road of industrious poverty till he came to the Temple of Fortune. Once there the goddess treated him kindly. He died a millionnaire, leaving two sons, the elder of whom inherited the bulk of his father's property, and carried on the ironworks, while the younger got forty thousand pounds in the funds, an estate called Tangley Manor, which was worth thirty thousand more, and turned country squire.

This was Walter Blake, Morton's father. He married a rural

dean's daughter, who died six years after their marriage, leaving him with three children. He led a steady, reputable life, and was popular in his district. He hunted and shot a great deal, and farmed a little, and visited everybody worth visiting in the county; and in the prime and heyday of life, when his son Morton was just ten years old, he was foully murdered one October evening in the lane leading to Austhorpe, as he rode home from the hunt.

This direful event happened on the very day of Dulcie's birth, so Morton, as well as his sweetheart, had reason to regard the 20th of October as a melancholy anniversary.

This did not prevent the lovers being quietly happy together, as they sat by the fire, while the north wind rattled the casements and wrung groans as of remonstrance from the rocking elm branches.

'What a wintry night!' exclaimed Dulcie. 'I must put my warm cloaks in hand directly. If this weather is going to last the children will want them ever so long before Christmas.'

All the village children were under Dulcie's protection. She made them cloaks and hoods for winter; she gave them smart hats and tippets for summer. She taught in the Sunday school, and gave grand entertainments of tea and buns on the lawn, where the cedars had been growing ever since John Evelyn's time. Children, and mothers, and old women, were all more or less in Dulcie's care. There was never sickness in the village without her knowing of it and ministering to the sufferer; seldom a coffin for which her fair hands did not weave a wreath of hot-house flowers.

'Dulcie, Dulcie, how would this world get on without you?' said Morton, smiling at her earnestness.

'I should be no more missed than a rain-drop that falls into the sea,' answered Dulcie, 'except by my father; and I suppose you would feel a want of something for the first day or two.'

'That day or two would be all my life, Dulcie.'

She had edged her stool away from her father's feet to Morton's, so they two were in a manner alone together, talking in subdued voices, while Sir Everard sat looking dreamily at the fire, absorbed in thought. There never was a happier picture of domestic life. The girl's fair head nestling closely against her lover's arm, as it lay on the velvet cushion of his chair; Morton's earnest face looking down at her—a face full of power, with marked features, an open brow, curly brown hair, and thoughtful gray eyes. The father, in his low, deep chair on the other side of the hearth, a man still in the prime and vigour of life, with a profile as delicately chiselled as a cameo, clear olive complexion eyes of a darkly luminous gray, hair and beard like Hamlet's father's, 'a sable silvered,' but eyebrows and lashes still black as

night. The face was at once handsome and remarkable. The form of forehead and skull promised a nature rich in fine qualities, benevolent, large-minded, intellectual. Dulcie might well be proud of such a father. The white hand with tapering fingers resting on the tawny velvet elbow of the chair would have been beautiful, even in a woman; yet it was a strong and muscular hand withal, and had pulled stroke on the Isis thirty years ago, and had been as true on the trigger of a rifle as the rugged paw of a Texan freebooter.

These quiet evenings were ordinarily periods of perfect repose and happiness for Sir Everard Courtenay, but on this one day of the year he was always thoughtful, and sometimes moody and depressed. If he could by any means have been beguiled into forgetting the date until the day was over and done with, he might perchance have been spared the pain of sad memories: but modern civilization does not permit such oblivion. There, on his newspapers, on his letters, the date stared him in the face, and compelled him to remember.

Dulcie was not unmindful of her father, even when she seemed most engrossed by her lover's conversation. She stole a little look at him now and then, and presently rose from her low seat and went softly to the piano. She knew that pathetic music had a soothing influence upon Sir Everard, even when his own thoughts were saddest.

She played one of Chopin's dreamiest nocturnes—a melody which seemed the plaintive whisper of a tender regret—a mournful yet caressing strain, as of one who loved the very sorrow that consumed him. Music with Dulcie was a gift rather than an accomplishment—there was soul in her fingers from the time she first touched the piano. Expression with her was thought and feeling, not a mechanical adjustment of finger tips, and mathematical gradation from loud to soft. She had been carefully taught and trained to interpret her favourite composers, but in whatever she played—Beethoven, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Chopin—there was always something of Dulcie's very self, an individual soul interwoven with every phrase.

She played on, passing from one nocturne to another, and then to the swelling chords of one of Beethoven's sonatas, while the shadows deepened in the room, and the logs dropped into ashes on the hearth.

Presently the door was softly opened, and the butler came in.

'There is a man in the office, Sir Everard, who wishes to see you on particular business. He has got a statement to make, he says.'

Sir Everard started up at the summons, thoroughly awakened out of his reverie. If there was one thing upon which he was more severe with himself than another it was in the strict performance of his magisterial duties. He was a man of culture, loving

books and art, and all the fairest things in life, a man to whom petty sessions and rural politics must needs be an abomination ; yet he loved order so well that he had willingly undertaken the office of magistrate, and once having put his hand to the plough, had never wavered. He was unerringly just, but he did not lean to the side of mercy, and the villagers thought him a Draco.

'What kind of a man ?'

'Looks like a tramp, Sir Everard !'

'What can he want ? Parish relief, I suppose. He should go to the overseer.'

'So I told him, Sir Everard, thinking it might be that, but it isn't. He says he wants to give himself up.'

'Give himself up ?'

'Yes, Sir Everard, for a murder committed twenty years ago.

Morton Blake started up, pale in the firelight. A man whose father had been murdered twenty years ago, on that very day, was not likely to hear such a statement calmly.

'Twenty years ago ?' he cried. 'Why this man must be my father's murderer. Let me see him—let me ——'

'My dear Morton, don't agitate yourself,' remonstrated Sir Everard quietly. 'Believe me, there is no reason. I know so well what this kind of thing means. Some idle, drunken, poaching, rick-burning vagabond, who has run the gamut of rural crime and drunk away the better part of his brains, takes it into his head to make his name famous by handing himself over to justice for the one solitary crime of which he is not guilty. A night in the lock-up at Highclere will bring him to his senses, and to-morrow morning he will be whining his recantation.'

'But the date,' exclaimed Morton, strongly agitated, 'twenty years ago, this very day——'

'A mere coincidence,' returned Sir Everard lightly. 'I dare say this vagabond never heard of your poor father, living or dead. I'll soon get rid of the ruffian. Is the lamp lighted in the office, Scroope ?'

'Yes, Sir Everard, and there's a good fire.'

'You'll come back to us directly you've done with the man, won't you, papa ?' pleaded Dulcie, accompanying her father to the door.

'Yes, dear, if you wish it.'

'I do very much wish it. If you dispose of your visitor quickly, we can have just a quarter of an hour's chat before the warning bell rings. You won't be too hard upon this poor ignorant creature, will you, dear father ?' urged Dulcie, who had always her gentle prayer for infinite mercy to rogues and vagabonds. Sinners would have had an easy time of it if Miss Courtenay had sat in the magistrate's chair.

Her father kissed her, and murmured a loving word or two, but

promised nothing; and then Dulcie, with a regretful sigh that there should be so much sin and sorrow in the world, went back to the hearth where Morton stood looking down at the logs with fixed and gloomy brow.

She laid her hand lightly on his shoulder, but he did not feel or did not heed the touch.

'Dear Morton,' she said, 'I am sorry this should have moved you so deeply.'

'I am always moved when I think of my father's death. Do you suppose it was out of my mind on this day, at this hour, the very hour in which he was riding quietly homeward from the hunt—riding homeward, but never to reach home alive? Do you think that I can forget, Dulcie—that I can ever forget how he died, and that his murderer has never been discovered? If I thought the man in your father's office at this moment had hand or part in that deed, I don't think the restraints of civilization would be strong enough to prevent me rushing to that room and flying at his throat like a bulldog.'

There was something of the bulldog in his look as he spoke, the gloomy, yet resolute eye, the powerful jaw, the appearance of reserved power, every muscle braced for a spring.

'Ever since I can remember I have had one wish always uppermost in my mind, the desire to find myself face to face with the man who killed my father. Great heaven, think that he may now, on this twentieth anniversary of the murder, be standing within fifty yards of me! Dulcie, why should I not go to your father's office? Why should I not hear what the scoundrel has to say?'

'For a hundred reasons. First, because you are in a most unchristian state of mind.'

'Unchristian!' muttered Blake. 'Is it unchristian to hate the man who murdered my father?'

'And would be likely to do some act which you might repent all the rest of your life. You heard what my father said, Morton? Be sure he knows what he is talking about. He has had thirteen years' experience of these people. The man will not be able to deceive him. He will have justice, rigid justice; I know that too well, for I have so often had to plead for mercy in vain.'

'And I am to wait here for an indefinite time?' said Morton, turning from her with an impatient gesture, and walking up and down the room. 'What, while a conversation which may be life or death for me is being carried on in my absence!'

Never before had he spoken so roughly to Dulcie. The change startled her, as when the glow and glory of a summer day turns all at once to cloud and storm. Some girls in Dulcie's position would have resented the rudeness of the lover; she thought only

of the son's devotion to a dead father. She stole to his side, and put her arm through his, and laid her head upon his shoulder.

'You will not have long to wait, dear Morton. My father manages these people so well. Only be patient for a little while.

CHAPTER IV.

'A WILFUL MAN MUST HAVE HIS WAY.'

THE magistrate's office was a panelled room which had been a private chapel in the days when country gentlemen of some standing kept their chaplains. It was a large and lofty apartment, but had a look of gloom and a chilly atmosphere upon this October evening, despite the coal fire which burned in the large grate at one end of the room. The grate was recessed in a cavernous chimney, and the greater part of the heat went up to the autumn skies.

Sir Everard's writing-table stood in front of the hearth, furnished with a pair of shaded moderator lamps, which threw all their light on the table, and left the magistrate's face in shadow. Sir Everard loved a subdued light, and hated the glare of gas, or unshaded lamps of any kind. He had the eye of a hawk, and could see as well in this half light as most people can in the broad day.

Humphrey Vargas stood a little way from the writing-table, a gaunt, clumsy figure, his arms hanging at his sides, his broad hands clenching and unclenching themselves with a nervous movement, now and then. His dog crouched at his side. The footman had tried to prevent the entrance of that mongrel to the magistrate's room, but Vargas had insisted.

'Where I goes my dog goes,' he said. 'You can't part us till you hang one on us.'

So there the dog was, quiet but watchful, evidently holding himself on the defensive, like a dog who knew he belonged to the criminal classes.

'Well, sir,' began the magistrate, seated in his roomy arm-chair—not a luxurious or effeminate chair, by any means, but the severest pollard oak and dark green morocco. 'Well, sir, what have you to say to me?'

'I want to give myself in charge.'

'Indeed! You are mighty conscientious all of a sudden. And pray which of your many crimes do you desire to expiate?'

He looked at the man keenly, though he spoke lightly, supposing he had to deal with some drunken vagabond who was only half in earnest. To his surprise, however, this man did not

look drunk. His gaunt frame and deeply sunken cheeks suggested starvation rather than riotous living. His eyes had a steady look, he stood firm upon his feet, and spoke like a man who had come there with a settled purpose.

'I wants to give myself up for a murder I did twenty year ago—twenty year ago this blessed day—the murder of Muster Blake.'

Sir Everard looked at him long and steadily, looked at him as if he would pluck out the heart of his mystery, penetrate to the very bottom of his soul.

'Oh,' he said, at last, with startling coolness, 'you are the man, are you? I thought the murderer would turn up sooner or later, but I did not suppose he would be self-accused. Come, sir, tell me your story, as plainly and as briefly as you can, and when I have written it down I shall read it over to you in the presence of a witness, and you must sign your name to it. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' answered Vargas unmoved.

'Well, begin,' said the magistrate, dipping a pen in the ink, and looking up at the self-accused with quiet intentness.

'Well, Sir Everard, things had gone bad with me that year—everythink. My wife had died, and when she was gone I went wrong altogether. It was the drink, I suppose. Perhaps I'd been a little wild in my ways while she was alive, but it warn't anythink to talk about, and she kep' a home over my head, though we'd had our troubles too. But when she was in the churchyard yonder, where she's lying now,' with a jerk of his head in the direction of the village, 'I took to the pubs. They was the only places where I found warmth and company, and I wasted my wages on drink till the children was barefoot, and then, finding myself out of work one morning, and the little ones nigh upon starving, I give it up altogether and runned away.'

'Leaving your children to the workhouse?'

'I couldn't have left 'em to a better home. The gals was brought up decently and sent to service, and the boys was taught trades. It's a deal more than I could ha' done for 'em. Well, Sir Everard, I turned my back upon my native place, and just turned waif and stray, doing an odd job of plastering here—for I'm a plasterer by trade—and a spell of haymakin' there, and a week or two at hop pickin', when the season came round, till somehow or other I worked my way back here, drifted like, strayed as a dog strays, for I didn't want to come. I'd no home to come to, no friend to give me a shelter, and I couldn't afford to show at the workus where my innercent orphans was ever so much better off without a father.'

Sir Everard had made the briefest note of this preliminary statement. The important disclosure was to come.

'Well, sir, one October day I finds myself standing under a sign-post in a wild bit of country, half wood, half heath, where three roads met. I'm blest if I knew until that moment, when I looked up and spied the name on the sign-post, how near I'd come to the old place. I knew I was in the county, and the hills and woods had the look of home somehow, but I didn't think I was half as near as I was. I seemed to come all over of a shiver when I found I was only six mile from the Union where those blessed kids was being brought up in the fear o' the Lord. I'd had no breakfast. I had ekzackerly three half-pence in my pocket, and a screw o' tobacco, and I knew I was a good two mile from any place where I could buy a penn'orth o' beer. It was a mild, still day, and the roads and lanes was mucky and soft, just the day for the scent to lie well. I'd seen the red coast in the distance on the slope of the hill, and I didn't want to meet none o' them, for the huntsman would ha' known me, seein' as I had run with the hounds and opened gates in old times when I was a lad.'

'So I just crep into the wood hard by, and laid down in the holler of a old oak, where I was as warm as a toast among the moss and withered leaves, and where I laid and smoked my pipe for a couple of hours at a stretch to quiet my empty inside. I didn't come out till it was drawing towards dusk. I'd heard the hounds giving tongue, and the huntsman's cry more than once while I laid there, as they wound and beat about wood and heath, but I thought I could get quietly back to the coach road without meeting any one as would reckernise me in the dusk. I took a short cut across the fields, meanin' to get back to the high road a mile or so from Austhorpe on the way to Highclere, and keep clear of the village altogether. I'd been on the tramp above a week since I left Kent, and I'd slept under 'edges and 'ay stacks, and there was pains in every blessed bone o' my body that gnawed like rats. I had my bit of a bundle swung on a cudgel over my shoulder, and I trudged on somehow, while the crows went wheeling across the sky, which was turning yaller, though there hadn't been not one blessed glimmer of sunshine all day. Well, you see, sir, I trudged along the muddy road, and I was just in that kind o' temper when the devil gets a grip upon a man and can make him do ekzackerly as he likes. I was hungry and thirsty and footsore; but what I felt more than hunger and thirst was a raging hate against them as wasn't, and never had been, nor never was likely to be famished and footsore and without a penny. Why should they have all the good things, and I all the bad things o' this life? I suppose I ain't the first man as has arst hisself that question, and I don't think I shall be the last; but I walks on, with such thoughts in my head, till I comes to the lane that leads from Austhorpe to Highclere, hard by Blatchmar-

dean wood, and presently I hears the steady tramp of a horse's hoofs walking along the soft road ; and I stands aside to let the rider go by, thinkin' he might be good for a sixpence. It's a gentleman in a red coat, and I begins my sorrerful tale, how I'd a sick wife and seven small children, and not a penny to buy bread—but before I gets half-way through I looks up into his face and rekernises him for my old enemy, Muster Blake, him as turned me off his estate and out of house and home, for a bit of a mistake made by a lurcher dog as I used to keep, with regard to some pheasants as he set particklar store by. I knows him and he knows me. "Get out o' my road, you vagabond," he cries, "I wouldn't give you sixpence to save you and all your brood from starving." He looked mortal handsome in his red coat and striped velvet weskit, and there was his thick gold watch chain and seals, swinging as he moved, and shinin' in the yaller light o' the low sky in front of him. He looked a regular swell, he did. That 'ere watch and chain of his must be worth fifty pounds anywheres, I thought, and I dessay his purse is full o' sovereigns ; for I knowed him to be one o' your fine, open-handed gentry, allus ready to give money to them as didn't want it. And Old Nick took me by the shoulders, and gave me a shove, as you may say, and whispered, "Pull the proud beggar off his horse ; pull him into the mud, and brain him." I looked round. There wasn't a mortal in sight. It was gettin' dark. I should be miles away before anybody knew anything. He was a strong man, on a strong horse. Could I do it? While I was hesitatin', the devil gives me another shove, and whispers, "I'll help you," and then I threw down my bundle, clutched holt of the bridle, and hit the hoss a crack o' the skull that brought him on his knees in the road, and before Muster Blake could recover from the shock of the hoss falling under him, he and I had closed with each other in a deadly struggle. He was bigger than me, stronger than me, a better man every way ; but Old Nick kep' his word, and stood by me like a good un. Muster Blake had only his huntin' crop with a bamboo cane and a leather thong. He cut me a wonner across the face with the thong, but I came down on his bare head—for his hat was knocked off at the first go—with the knobby end of my cudgel. I heard his skull go crack, like a bit o' glass, and then he fell backwards into the muddy road, and I just dragged him quietly into the ditch and cleaned out his pockets. There was a leather purse full of gold and silver, as I hoped, and his watch and chain, and a diamond ring on his little finger, and I felt I had done a good day's work. For, yer see, I didn't know for sure as I'd killed him. Even if that was his skull as I heard go crack, the doctors might lay a bit o' metal atop on it, and make a sound man of him again. I'd heard tell o' such things. So I tied the watch and chain and ring and money up in my fogle, and

stuffed it all into my breeches pocket, and caught up my bundle on the end o' my cudgel, and made tracks for the Highclere road.'

'When and where did you dispose of the stolen property?' inquired Sir Everard, after a pause.

'At Great Barford, six weeks after Muster Blake's death.'

'And I suppose this is all you have to tell me?'

'Yes, sir, this yere's about all.'

Throughout this confession Sir Everard Courtenay had sat in a thoughtful attitude, with his left elbow on the table, and his forehead resting on his left hand, while with his right he jotted down an occasional note upon the paper before him. It was not possible for Vargas to see the impression made on the listener's mind by his narrative.

'Come, now, my man,' said the magistrate, looking up at him suddenly, with a frank friendliness, 'you've told your story very well, and to some ears it might sound like the truth, but it doesn't to mine. I know what a curious machine the human mind is, and what strange twists it sometimes takes. Don't you think you'd better forget you've told me anything, except that you're hard up and want a night's lodging?'

'No,' answered Vargas, in a surly tone, 'I'm not going from my word. What you've took down there I'll stand by.'

'You will? Have you considered that it's a hanging matter? That you are offering yourself as a candidate for the gallows?'

'I don't feel sure as they'd hang a man—after twenty years.'

'You won't find the twenty years make any difference.'

'Besides, it warn't altogether murder, yer see. When I hit him that crack over the skull I didn't know as it 'ud be his death.'

'I fear you will hardly find a Daleshire jury inclined to draw such nice distinctions. Mr. Blake was a popular man, and feeling ran high about his murder. I would not give much for your life after that statement of yours has been read before twelve Daleshiremen.'

'I'll risk it,' said Vargas doggedly. 'I don't believe they'll hang me. If they do it'll be ending a life that ain't worth living. Come, get your witness, Sir Everard, I wants to sign that there deppysition.'

'You are an obstinate fool,' exclaimed the baronet angrily. 'And if I refuse to receive your statement I suppose you will go and make the same confession to some one else.'

'I shall go to Highclere as fast as my poor old legs will carry me—which is slow enough, Lord knows—and give myself up to the magistrate there.'

'A wilful man must have his way,' said Sir Everard, ringing a bell which sounded loud and shrill in the outer office. 'Your

way is the gallows. Remember that I have warned you, and don't ask me to help you after to-night, for it will be out of my power to do so. Don't come and whine to me when you've changed your mind.'

'I shan't change my mind,' answered Vargas. 'I ain't afraid o' that. But as you seem to wish to deal kind by a poor devil, I'll arst you a favour. I've got a bit of a dog here. He ain't much to look at, but he'll keep your poultry yard clear o' rats. Give him a armful o' straw to lie on and a bit o' vitals to eat, and you'll be doin' it ten times over to me.'

'He shall be taken care of,' answered Sir Everard.

A man-servant appeared in answer to the bell.

'Send for Jackson immediately, and take that dog to the stables. Tell Gilbert he is to be taken care of.'

'God bless you, Sir Everard,' said Vargas, with moistening eyes.

He took the cur up by the scruff of his neck, pressed his cold muzzle against his own dry lips, and handed him to the servant.

'The constable will be here in ten minutes, if he happen to be at home when my messenger calls at his cottage,' said Sir Everard, addressing himself to Vargas when the servant left the room. 'You have just ten minutes for reflection and repentance. If you don't change your mind in that time you'll be booked. I'll leave you to reflect.'

He went away, leaving the self-accused at perfect liberty to make a bolt of it by the back door if he pleased. Never had Sir Everard treated a criminal so leniently. This was due to Dulcie's influence, no doubt.

CHAPTER V.

DULCIE ASKS QUESTIONS.

Despite his promise, Sir Everard did not go back to the drawing-room immediately on leaving his office. He went straight to his study, a cosy room lined with books from floor to ceiling, where he generally spent his mornings. There was a shaded lamp burning on the small round table near the fire, and the red light of the logs was reflected cheerfully on the gay colours of the tiled hearth. Dark-green velvet curtains were drawn before the one wide window; everything suggested snugness and seclusion.

Sir Everard sank, with a weary air, into his chair by the hearth, and lay back with closed eyes, resting from his labours.

'What an obstinate fool the fellow is!' he said to himself; 'and how strange that this monomania of self-accusation should crop up as often as it does. Yet there's a part of his story that sounds true. The watch and chain were pledged at Great Barford. That fact came out at the time, and the police tried to follow up the clue, ineffectually.'

The warning bell rang while he sat thinking by the fire, and Sir Everard went upstairs to change his black velvet lounging jacket for evening clothes, leaving Vargas to his fate. Domestic life at Fairview could not be hindered in its quiet course because a self-accused criminal was anxious to deliver himself over to the law. Sir Everard's valet was in attendance in his dressing-room, a man of about five-and-thirty, tall, slim, with insignificant features, and a faded complexion, redeemed by clever-looking gray eyes; a very superior person altogether, and looked up to by the household. His master had picked him up at the gates of the *Hotel des Invalides* in Paris, where, in an impecunious interval, he was trying to earn a franc or two by acting as guide to inquiring-minded tourists. He was a man who had seen life under curious aspects. Starting as the scapegrace son of a country parson, he had cut short his university career by a boyish folly, and had then and there turned his back upon what society calls respectability, and what he called Philistinism. He had dug a deepish hole in the paternal purse during his college days, but had made a manly stand against any further dependence upon his father. 'I am not fit for anything but a wandering life, and I'd better be a waif and a stray abroad than a burden at home,' he said. After arriving at this decision, he had enjoyed a varied career as courier, waiter, billiard-marker in France and Switzerland, had acquired all sorts of odd out-of-the-way talents, and had finally found himself in Paris, without friends or credentials, face to face with starvation, when Sir Everard Courtenay heard his story, believed it, and took him into his service. Never had master a better servant, or one who seemed more conscientious in the performance of his duties.

'There is rather a queer character in my office, Stanton,' said Sir Everard. 'You'd better tell Scroope to keep his eye upon the plate-room, and tell them to let me know when the constable comes. I shan't want you.'

Everything necessary to the baronet's toilet had been put ready. The valet retired quietly, and Sir Everard began to dress.

He was somewhat slower than his wont in the process of dressing—dawdled and lingered a little, took things up and laid them down again, with a dreamy, irresolute air. Was not this a day full of sad memories? and those memories had been made more vivid by the tramp's confession.

He could hardly think about Walter Blake's murder without

recalling his wife's untimely death, which had happened on the same day. He was on his knees beside the deathbed when the news was brought to Fairview.

At last all was done, quickly enough, though he had lingered, and Sir Everard went down to the drawing-room, passing Scroope in the hall as he went.

'Jackson went to Highclere this afternoon, Sir Everard,' said the butler. 'Not expected home before nine o'clock. Gilbert left word that he was to come here directly.'

'Very good; you can keep an eye on that man in my office, he may be a thief.'

'I've turned the key in the door, Sir Everard.'

'That is unnecessary. Go and unlock it at once, and give the fellow a meal of bread and meat: he looks half-starved.'

Morton Blake was sitting alone before the fire, when Sir Everard went into the drawing-room.

'Well, sir,' he cried, getting up quickly and going to meet his host, 'you have kept me a long time in suspense. Was there any truth in my suspicion? Is this man my father's murderer?'

'Pray restrain yourself, Morton. The man is in my opinion either mad, or a rogue who for some occult reason accuses himself of a crime he has not committed.'

'Then he has confessed—he is the man,' cried Morton hoarsely. 'Let me see him—let me hear——'

'My dear Morton, this is a business in which you have no right to interfere.'

'No right—no right! I, the victim's son?'

'Absolutely none. You must wait till the law of the land shall avenge your father's death. If this man has spoken the truth—which I strongly doubt—and if he adhere to his statement by-and-by, the business will be easy enough, and you may have the satisfaction of seeing him hanged in Highclere jail, and may possibly be a happy man ever afterwards.'

'I shall be a more contented man, anyhow, when I know that my father's murderer has been punished,' answered Morton resolutely. 'Well, what is to be done next? The man is in your office, handcuffed, in custody, I suppose?'

'Not yet. I am waiting till Jackson comes home from Highclere. Don't look so savage, Morton. The man is safe enough. He wishes to give himself into custody.'

'He may change his mind, and give you the slip.'

'No fear of that. I have told Scroope to look after him, and Scroope has locked him in.'

'Sensible of Scroope. What kind of creature is he—this devil?'

'If I described him at all I should call him a poor devil."

'Can't I see him—without his knowing it—so that I might

identify him if he should escape? I want to have the man's image in my mind. The scoundrel who killed my father in his prime of life and vigour, with all the world smiling on him, and all the future full of hope. Can't I see him, Sir Everard?'

'If you like to go round the house and look in at the office window you may see him plain enough, I dare say. The shutters were not shut when I was there. But there's the bell, and here's Dulcie. You'd better come to dinner.'

'No, no,' answered Morton, painfully agitated. 'I can't dine to-night. You must excuse me, Sir Everard. Dulcie!'—she was standing close at his side, pale, and watchful of his face—'forgive me, dear. I must go. I will come back later in the evening, Sir Everard, and hear what has happened. You won't play me false in this, will you? I believe the man has told the truth. I believe that retribution is coming after twenty years. Don't take the matter lightly. Remember, my father was your friend.'

'Am I likely to forget that? His face is in my mind to-night. But in a matter of this kind I must not let passion be my guide. However, I have happily very little to do here. I shall hand this fellow over to Jackson, the constable, and then my work is done. But you must be reasonable, Morton; affection must not make you unjust. Deeply as you must feel your father's death it could be no satisfaction to you to hang an innocent man.'

'Why do you take it for granted that this man is innocent?' Morton demanded impatiently.

'Simply because he calls himself guilty. Real guilt rarely surrenders liberty and life uncompelled. I have not the least doubt that, after having caused you all this painful agitation, and me a good deal of trouble, the fellow will make his recantation to-morrow before the Highclere magistrates.'

'Good-night,' said Morton shortly. 'Good-night, Dulcie.'

He scarcely touched the hand she gave him as he passed hurriedly from the room.

'What a miserable birthday!' thought poor Dulcie, as she and her father went across the hall to the dining-room. 'My birthdays have always been sad, but this is the worst of all.'

The father and daughter sat opposite each other at the snug round table, with Morton's empty place between them. There had been no special invitation for to-day's dinner, but the place was always laid for him when he was in the house. Dulcie gave one sad little look at the vacant chair, and then made believe to go on with her dinner, eating hardly anything. The solemn Scroope moved to and fro, with his underling following up and supporting him, as it were; and the two servants ministering assiduously to the wants of two people, utterly without appetite or inclination to eat, were an admirable example of domestic

comedy in the 'Much Ado about Nothing' line. From the clear soup to the wild duck Scroope abated no iota of ceremony.

Dulcie was longing to be alone with her father, but Scroope lingered affectionately by her plate, with offers of lemon and cayenne.

He insisted on her taking dessert, and when she had refused a bunch of purple grapes which might have tempted an anchorite, followed her up, perseveringly, with preserved ginger. He was very particular about the temperature of Sir Everard's claret, and made a good deal of play with the jug before he could bring his mind to the necessity of leaving father and daughter alone.

During dinner they had talked very little, and only of indifferent subjects. Dulcie's eyelids were heavy with unshed tears. Sir Everard was grave and absent-minded. But at last, to the girl's infinite relief, Scroope and his subordinate withdrew, the latter respectfully drawing the door after him with his foot, and father and daughter were alone.

Sir Everard wheeled his chair round, and sat facing the fire; Dulcie crept round to the hearth, and took her favourite place on the fender stool at his feet, with her bright head resting on the arm of his chair.

'Dearest father, I want you to tell me a great many things,' she said coaxingly, yet seriously withal, and her face was full of earnestness, as she looked up at him. 'There are some questions I can't ask Morton. Will it make you very sad if I talk about —the past?'

'I am always sad when I think of the past, Dulcie. Whether you talk of it or no can make very little difference.'

'I want you to tell me about Morton's father. Was he a good man?'

'He was a popular man, good looking, clever, open-handed. That kind of man is generally liked.'

'And you liked him?'

'My dear, what a question! He was one of my oldest friends. We were at Rugby and at Cambridge together.'

'Yes, I know. But those friendships do not always last. You might have altered towards each other afterwards. I have sometimes fancied that there was a constraint in your manner when you talked to Morton about his father, or, rather, when Morton has mentioned his father, for I have seldom heard you speak of him of your own accord.'

'The terrible circumstances of his death make the subject a painful one.'

'Yes, I ought to have understood that. But I have noticed that people get accustomed to any idea, however dreadful, and end by talking of it familiarly, as if it were an everyday event.'

'I could never grow accustomed to the idea of Walter Blake's death.'

'That is because you are more sensitive than the common herd of people,' answered his daughter lovingly. 'Tell me, dear father, do you think the man in your office is really the murderer?'

'My love, how can I tell? There are some points in his story which to my mind bear the stamp of improbability. Yet, if it be found that he is the man who disposed of the murdered man's property, it will go hard with him to prove himself innocent, supposing that he should wish to get his neck out of the noose into which he has thrust it.'

'Should you be glad if he were found guilty, if it were proved to the satisfaction of everybody that he is the murderer?' asked Dulcie, intensely earnest.

'Not glad, dear. Yet it is a good thing that the perpetrator of a great crime should be discovered, even after an interval of many years; that he should be so lashed and goaded by his own conscience as to give himself up to justice. Yes, it must be good. It may serve as a warning to many. Think how sharp the sting of conscience must be when it can goad a man to the surrender of liberty and life.'

'Poor creature!' sighed Dulcie, full of pity even for the vilest of mankind. Young and inexperienced as she was, her mind and heart were large enough to comprehend and compassionate all sin and sorrow. 'He must have been horribly tempted before he could commit such a crime. Was it starvation that drove him to it, do you think?'

'His plea is something of that kind. Blake had treated him badly, it seems.'

'Revenge. That is a fearful passion,' said Dulcie.

'One you will never know, I hope, little one,' answered her father tenderly. 'And now, dear, we will talk no more about painful things. My poor Dulcie, what a sorrowful birthday!'

'Not altogether sorrowful, dear father. To be with you is enough happiness for me.'

'Is it, Dulcie?' asked her father, bending down to look searchingly into the sweet, fair face, with frank blue eyes lifted lovingly to meet his own. 'Are you sure of that? Yet if I were to ask you to give up Morton—if you and he were doomed to be parted—your heart would break. Have you not confessed as much as that?'

'Does it seem inconsistent?' she asked. 'Is it impossible to love two people intensely? You have given me to Morton; and I know you would never take your gift back. I am not afraid of injustice from you. But if such a thing were possible—if you stood on one side and Morton on the other—and I were called upon to choose between my father and my lover——'

'What would you do?'

'I would cleave to you, father. I don't know which is the greater love, but I know which is the more sacred. You are more to me than all the world.'

'My darling!' cried Sir Everard, bending to kiss the earnest lips.

CHAPTER VI.

'THIS MAN KILLED MY FATHER.'

WHILE the father and daughter sat together by the cheerful home fireside, exchanging confidences full of love and trustfulness, Morton Blake was pacing the shrubbery path alone, his soul at war with all the world. He went round to the back of the house where the lighted windows of the justice-room shone out upon the misty autumn night. There were no shutters or blinds to hide the scene within. Morton walked close up to the window, and looked in as at a stage play.

There at a plain oaken table in the centre of the large, scantily furnished room, at some distance from Sir Everard's writing-table and arm-chair, sat the self-accused murderer, eating his supper of bread and meat.

A joint and a big home-baked loaf had been set before him, and he had been left alone with the food, no one to measure or stint his meal. He was eating more like a savage beast than a human being; now tearing a slice of meat, anon gnawing at a huge hunch of bread; his eyes shifting uneasily towards the door every other instant, as if he thought the whole thing were too good to be true, and expected momentarily to be interrupted in his feast.

'Wolf!' muttered Morton, scowling at him through the glass. 'Could any man in his senses doubt this creature's capacity for murder? A mere ravenous beast, a body wanting to be fed, muscles and sinews, and flesh and bone craving nutriment, a being without mind, or heart, or conscience; a creature that would as soon kill as breathe. Strange that remorse can have power over a soul so blunted and brutalized, a nature so gross and low.'

He stood as if rooted to the spot, watching every look, every movement of the man inside.

'This man killed my father,' he said to himself. 'This debased wretch, wanting only to eat and live, cut short that brave happy life in its flower, laid that handsome head in the dust, and made my boyhood desolate. For the sake of a handful of sovereigns and a few trinkets that noble life was sacrificed. Devil,' he muttered between his set teeth, 'I am sorry that the law must have

you. I would rather my own right hand avenged my father's death.'

The man ate on with undiminished voracity ; hacking the joint, mauling the big brown loaf, luxuriating in the plenitude of an unfamiliar luxury. Once, and once only, he paused in his banquet, and that was to look down at his knee, and then along the floor, and under the table wistfully, with a regretful sigh.

'I wish Tim had been here,' he said. 'Wouldn't he ha' enjoyed hisself ? But ee's well off, I'll warrant. That Sir Everard's a soft un, though folks calls him hard.'

There came a stage in the meal when even the starved wayfarer's hunger was appeased. The joint had shrunk to a bone, the noble loaf was reduced by half, and Humphrey Vargas leant back in his chair a contented man. True that he had surrendered his liberty, that fetters and jail were to be his portion, that a possible gallows loomed in the future. The thought of these things troubled him but little. He had filled himself with bread and meat. For the first time in many months he had enjoyed an ample meal.

The cautious butler had given him nothing but water to drink, obeying Sir Everard's order in the letter rather than the spirit. His master had said bread and meat, and he had given the man bread and meat, no more and no less.

'I should ha' liked a sup o' gatter,' sighed the tramp, 'but I've blowed myself out pretty fair without it, and I ain't ungrateful. To-morrow, I suppose, it'll be skilly and soup ; but that'll be a deal better than hips and haws, and bits o'mouldy pannam, stole out of a pigsty.'

Morton Blake walked away from the window, and strolled slowly round by a shrubberied walk to the broad terrace in front of the house.

The moon had arisen, and the mists of evening were floating away from garden and chase, and the wide landscape beyond Fairview stood on high ground, and from the terrace Morton could see woodland and valley, the twinkling lights of a low-lying village, and yonder, far away to the left, on the edge of the horizon, the dimly-defined outline of the roofs and steeples of Highclere, the county town.

The wind had gone down with the rising of the moon. The air was cold, but Morton was hardly sensible of its chilliness as he walked slowly up and down the terrace, or paused now and then to stand with folded arms looking across the Italian garden, the velvet lawns, and choice timber, to the vaguer world beyond, looking with fixed eyes, which saw no feature of the familiar scene. 'How cold and indifferent they are !' he said to himself. 'It seems nothing to them that after all these years my father's murderer stands revealed, and retribution is at hand. Even

Dulcie would sooner yonder wretch should go scot free than that he should expiate his crime. Yes, I believe she would be weak enough to feel sorry for him.'

For the first time in his life he was inclined to be angry with his betrothed—for the first time since he had known and loved her he felt their hopes and interests were divided.

How sad she had looked when he left her just now. He seemed to himself hardly to have noticed that tender pleading glance at the time ; yet now that one particular look flashed upon his memory, and was as vividly present to his eye as a face in a picture, and that one picture the gem of the gallery. He turned towards the porch, tempted to go back to Dulcie. The lighted windows of her favourite room shone out upon the moonlit garden, with the cheerful glow of lamps and fire. He was in no mood for lover's talk, or music, or poetry, or art ; but he wanted to see Dulcie again before the evening was over.

The hall-door was neither locked nor barred against him. He had only to turn the handle and go in ; yet on the point of doing so he changed his mind, and went back to the shrubbery at the end of the house, and round again to the justice-room. When he looked through the window the prisoner was no longer alone. Sir Everard was standing by his writing-table, with a paper in his hand, reading its contents aloud, while the local constable respectfully listened, and Vargas stood aloof, twisting his flabby hat in his bony old hands, and quietly awaiting the next turn in that wheel of fortune which had rarely revolved in such a way as to bring him any good.

Presently Vargas, at the magistrate's bidding, walked up to the table, and, with laborious effort, affixed his signature to the deposition that had just been read over to him. His sign-manual was only a cross, but he took as much pains in producing it as if it had been the most perfect thing in autographs.

'I've got a shay-cart at my place,' said the constable, who was a bluff, rosy-cheeked rustic, 'and I shall soon spin him over to Highclere. You haven't got nothink in the way of firearms or other weapons about you, have you, mate ?' he inquired of Vargas, running his hand dexterously over the man's gaunt figure, as he spoke, to assure himself that there were no such implements of slaughter concealed under his scanty rags.

'No,' growled Vargas, 'I can't see where a old scarecrow like me could hide a revolver or a blunderbuss. There ain't much room in my rotten old togs.'

The constable clapped a pair of handcuffs upon him with a business-like air, as if there were no malice in the proceeding, and then with a bow to Sir Everard led his prisoner away.

'Thank God,' exclaimed Morton, 'my mind is easier now that's done.'

He ran quickly round to the front of then house, and the to the avenue along which the two men must come, and here in the shadow of the elm trunks he stood and waited for them.

They passed him presently, the prisoner walking at a slow and dogged pace beside the guardian of the village peace, his head sunk on his breast, his fettered wrists hanging in front of him, his weary old shoulders stooping under the burden of a long life of penury, disrepute, and evil-doing; a creature too low for hatred, looked at from a philosopher's point of view. Morton Blake saw in him not the natural product of an imperfect civilization, but only the murderer of a beloved father, and hated him with unmeasured wrath.

He followed the constable and his companion to the village, waited while a Methuselah among ponies was harnessed to the shay-cart, and saw the official drive briskly along the moonlit lane towards Highclere, with his prisoner sitting anyhow, a high-shouldered heap of degraded humanity, at his side.

'They will pass the ditch where my father was found twenty years ago this very night,' said Morton.

He set off across the field to his own house, pondering as he went along how he was to tell the story of to-night's business at home.

Tangley Manor was just a mile and a half from Austhorpe, in the opposite direction to Highclere. It was a pleasant walk through country lanes, crossing the London road about half way from Austhorpe. The estate was large, the land some of the most fertile in the county, for old Geoffrey Blake had never bought a bad thing. There was a good deal of wood, which the purchaser had got for a song, but which gave dignity and beauty to the substantial modern mansion which he had built on the site of a picturesque old half-timbered farmhouse.

The lighted windows of Tangley Manor House shone upon Morton with a comfortable look, as he walked slowly across the common which lay between the gates and the coach-road.

The house stood only a little way back from the common, a lawn and flower-beds in front, shrubberies on each side. Encircling the garden and shrubberies there was a wood, where no axe had been heard, save for improvement, for the last fifty years. Old Geoffrey Blake had loved Tangley, and his son Walter, born in the newly-erected manor-house, had inherited his father's affection for every tree and every acre.

'Poor Aunt Dora!' sighed Morton, as he drew nearer the house. 'She will feel it most. She loved him dearly, and mourned him more deeply than any of us, yes, even than I; for as time went by and I grew older I had all the distractions of Rugby and Cambridge, while she sat at home and mourned for him. How shall I tell her?—how re-open the old wound without

giving her unspeakable pain? But she must know. The county papers will be full of this business, two days hence!'

CHAPTER VII.

MORTON'S WOMENKIND.

THE drawing-room at Tangley Manor was as handsome and as interesting as any room can be which has not been mellowed and sanctified by the passage of centuries. It was a spacious and lofty room, with a noble bay on one side, and three long French windows on the other. There was a fireplace at each end, the white marble mantel-pieces low and broad, giving ample space for the display of some exquisite specimens of modern Sèvres, chosen by Geoffrey Blake during one of his holiday visits to Paris, a city which had possessed peculiar interest for his active and inquiring mind. The furniture was in perfect taste, light in form and delicate in colour, simple as befitted a room that was designed rather for daily usage than for stately receptions. There were dwarf bookcases between the windows, and on each side of the fireplace; water-coloured drawings on the wall; ferns and flowers wherever space could be found for them.

The room wore its most cheerful aspect to-night when Morton entered it, after his lonely walk by field, and lane, and common. Wood fires burned brightly in the two grates. Large moderator lamps, with coloured shades, gave a warm, yet subdued light. Four ladies were seated near the fireplace at the further end of the room, in various attitudes, and variously employed.

The middle-aged lady, sitting in a low, wide arm-chair with a lamp and a work-basket on the gipsy table before her, was Walter Blake's maiden sister, Dorothy, better known in that house as Aunt Dora, the head of the household, respected and beloved by every member of the family, from Morton to the newest comer in the shape of a chubby-cheeked scullery-maid or a fortnight-old kitten.

She was one of those women whose beauty in youth is open to question, but who are undeniably handsome in later life. As a girl Dorothy Blake's face had lacked colour and brightness; her manners had been wanting in animation. Girls with homelier features and more vivid complexions had been admired where Dorothy's pale and interesting countenance passed unnoticed. But at forty-five Miss Blake's clearly-chiselled features and delicate complexion, her slim and graceful figure, made her remarkable among middle-aged women.

Her hair had grown gray before she was six-and-twenty. It had not bleached suddenly in a single night, but within one year of that night of horror on which Walter Blake's corpse was

carried home to Tangley Manor his sister's dark brown hair had changed to gray. It was now of a silvery hue, which harmonized exquisitely with the pale fair skin and soft hazel eyes.

Aunt Dora's gowns always fitted to perfection, and were always in the fashion; yet she never wore a garment unbefitting her years. She was not the kind of woman to encase herself in a boating Jersey because the fashion book told her that Jerseys were universally worn. The young people of her acquaintance looked up to her as an authority on dress and manners, the arbiter of taste. She loved all beautiful things, pretty girls, delicate colours, flowers wild and exotic, ferns hedgerow or hothouse, handsome furniture, rich dress, thorough-bred horses. She had tastes wide enough to embrace all the delights of life, yet was not self-indulgent. She would leave the cosy chair beside the Gothic fireplace in her luxurious morning room to walk three or four miles through muddy lanes in the vilest weather, if by so doing she could give comfort to the afflicted in mind or body. She was the friend and adviser of all the wives, mothers, and daughters in the parish.

On a corner of the fender stood in front of the fireplace sat Morton's eldest sister, Clementine, otherwise Tiny, a delicately-fashioned girl, who seemed never to have grown out of childhood, and who was a perpetual outrage to Horatia—her strong-minded younger sister—a tall, plump, well-filled-out young woman, who looked just as many years too old as Tiny looked too young for her age. The sisters were curiously different in character, tastes, and personal appearance; yet they contrived to be on excellent terms with each other, and only quarrelled in sport.

Horatia was playing at chess with a girl who seemed younger than either of Morton's sisters; a girl with soft gray eyes, rippling brown hair, and features with no special claim to beauty, save that the rosy mobile lips were lovely in form and expression, and the teeth perfect in shape and colour. This last was a young lady about whom Daleshire society troubled itself very little. She was rarely included in those invitations to garden parties and afternoon dances which were sent to the daughters of the house. She was known to be a humble dependent upon Miss Blake; a girl of obscure birth whom that lady had adopted fifteen years ago; an altogether estimable young person in her proper sphere—that sphere being, of course, one of usefulness and not of ornament—a girl born to carry comforts to the sick and poor, and whom one would be surprised to meet in the lanes or on the common without a basket on her arm; a girl who would be expected to like walking in wet weather, and always to wear thick boots and short petticoats; to be expert in every branch of decorative art, from the fitting-up of a baby-basket to the arrangement of a dinner-table; a girl who would be a marvel of

handiness in all those small duties that make up the preparation for a grand party, who would work like a slave till the last moment before the arrival of the guests, and who would not feel the faintest desire to mingle with the festive throng. This was the kind of thing which Daleshire society expected from Elizabeth Hardman, of whose birth and connexions it was only vaguely stated that she belonged to factory people at Blackford, and ought, in the common course of events, herself to be making steel pens or brass buttons. Society, as represented by Mrs. Aspinall, of the Towers, looked with a disapproving eye on Aunt Dora's adoption of the orphan.

'These things never turn out well for anybody concerned,' said Mrs. Aspinall, with her superior air, as if she had been by when the foundations of the earth were laid, and had seen the stars marshalled into their places. 'That girl will be a thorn in Dorothy Blake's side before we are many years older.'

Meanwhile Elizabeth Hardman was happy enough, though she was left out of everybody's lawn parties, and only knew what an afternoon dance was like from Tiny's vivid description. She was not a girl of wide ambitions. Her highest aspiration at present was to please Aunt Dora, and she was as entirely happy trudging over the common with a well-filled basket on her arm, as she would have been at the finest assembly in Daleshire.

Aunt Dora and the three girls looked up as Morton entered, all surprised at his return.

'How early you are!' exclaimed Tiny, throwing herself back against the marble pillar of the chimney-piece, and stretching out her pretty little feet for the easier contemplation of a pair of picturesque buckled shoes and black silk stockings. 'Did the spooning process seem a little flat this evening? We seldom see you till past eleven when you have been dining at Fairview.'

'I have not dined at Fairview.'

'Then where have you been dining, child?' asked Horatia, with her practical manner. 'It must have been a very dull dinner or you would hardly have come away so early. If you don't want to be ignominiously checkmated in three more moves, Lizzie, you had better put a little more intention into your playing,' added the younger Miss Blake severely.

Lizzie Hardman detested chess and all other games of skill or chance, but had to play anything and everything when the Miss Blakes wanted an adversary. She was a capital person to play against, as she invariably lost the game.

Just now her senses had fled from the board altogether, scared by that pale, set look in Morton's face, which indicated trouble of some kind. Aunt Dora was occupied with her knitting, and had only murmured a friendly welcome. Tiny was still gazing at her shoe-buckles, and thinking how nice it was to be born with a high

instep. Horatia was absorbed in a profound scheme for checkmating her weak antagonist in three moves.

'I haven't dined at all,' said Morton, dropping into a chair near his aunt. 'I have had some business to look after.'

'Not dined!' cried Aunt Dora. 'Ring the bell, Tiny; your brother must have some dinner. There was a pheasant sent away untouched. If you were to have that after a little soup, Morton.'

'Dear auntie, don't worry yourself about pheasants and soups, said her nephew, with a wearied air. 'I am rather tired, but I've no appetite for dinner. I'll take a crust and a glass of wine presently.'

Tiny withdrew her gaze from her shoes to contemplate humanity in the uninteresting form of a brother. They were very pretty eyes—blue and bright, and smiling like sunshiny weather.

'You have quarrelled with Dulcie!' she exclaimed. 'Nothing less than that would explain your dilapidated condition.'

'Dulcie and I are not given to quarrelling,' answered her brcther curtly.

'What, do you never fight desperately, in order to make friends again?' asked Tiny. 'I thought that was one of the symptoms of spooning.'

'Clementine, your slang and flippancy are becoming more insufferable every hour,' remarked Horatia, with her fingers hovering above a bishop.

'Will you give me five minutes in your own room, Aunt Dora?' asked Morton in a low voice.

Miss Blake laid down her knitting instantly, and rose to comply with his request.

'Morton, how white you are looking!' she exclaimed. 'Something has happened.'

'Yes, something has happened.'

'Nothing that concerns Dulcie?'

Aunt Dora was very fond of Morton's sweetheart.

'No, dearest auntie, Dulcie is right enough.'

Horatia and Clementine now began to perceive that something was amiss. Tiny rose from her low seat. Horatia left the game unfinished.

'Morton, you are unnecessarily mysterious and alarming,' she said disapprovingly. 'Has anything dreadful happened? Is anybody ill? Is anybody dead? Has the Daleshire bank broken?'

'None of these things has happened. Aunt Dora will tell you all by-and-by,' answered Morton gravely. 'The event which has come to pass to-night is something which ought to make us all glad; but it revives the sorrow of years gone by. You know what anniversary this is.'

'I wish I didn't,' exclaimed Tiny; 'I have been trying industriously to forget it all day.'

'I never try to forget,' said Horatia ; 'I consider it a duty to remember. It is a small thing for us to give our dead father some of our thoughts on this day.'

Aunt Dora's soft brown eyes were full of tears. She put her hand in Morton's, and went with him out of the room, and across the wide tesselated hall to her pretty nest at the back of the house.

The fire burned low on the tiled hearth. There was a moderator lamp on the table, which Morton lighted before he sat down. The room was the brightest and prettiest in the house. Here, as in the drawing-room, there were books, and flowers, and water-coloured pictures, and old china ; but here everything had a peculiar grace and interesting individuality. There were indications of a life at once artistic and industrious—a drawing board with an unfinished flower study on the table in the window, a large bee-hive work-basket in a corner by the hearth, one little table devoted to account-books and the common-place details of house-keeping, another to Aunt Dora's favourite poets and philosophers, from Chaucer to Tennyson, from Erasmus to De Quincey.

Of all the pictures in the room there was one which caught the stranger's eye and arrested it. It was a portrait in water-colour, which hung above the chimney-piece. The half-length figure of a man in the prime of life—a frank, handsome face, bright blue eyes, crisply-curling auburn hair, a broad forehead, a candid mouth,—a face supremely attractive and lovable, suggestive of an existence that had never been shadowed by grief or care, a soul untinted by base thought.

This was the portrait of Walter Blake, painted two years before his death, at a time when he had recovered from the moderate amount of sorrow which he had felt for the loss of a somewhat uninteresting wife, never passionately loved. The picture had been painted as a birthday gift for the sister who worshipped him. It was the only likeness for which Walter Blake had ever consented to sit.

Morton looked up at the picture, as he took his seat beside the hearth. Never had the face seemed so life-like.

'Tell me what has happened, Morton,' said Dora Blake anxiously, but in no wise shaken from that abiding tranquility which was her greatest charm. 'It is something that concerns my brother's death, is it not ? Some discovery has been made.'

'Yes, there has been a discovery, and an important one. My father's murderer has given himself up to justice. He will sleep to-night in Highclere jail.'

Dorothea's pale face blanched to a death-like whiteness.

'Great Heaven !' she exclaimed, 'who—who—is the man ?'

All her calmness was gone—her lips trembled so much that she could hardly form the words she wanted to speak.

'A wretched creature—a half-starved tramp—more like a wolf than a man.'

'Thank God,' exclaimed Dorothea.

'Thank God,' echoed Morton. 'I do with all my heart thank God that retribution has come at last; that we shall have blood for blood. A poor compensation, for who could set such a creature's existence against my father's valuable life?'

'We are all of the same value in the sight of our Heavenly Father, Morton,' answered Aunt Dora, in her grave, sweet tones. 'In His sight we are all sinners. I am sorry for this unhappy creature whom remorse has driven to confess his crime.'

'Sorry! Sorry for the man who killed your brother?' cried Morton indignantly. 'That may be Christianity, but it is a kind of Christianity I do not understand.'

'I am sorry for his sin and for the shameful death he will have to die!'

'And I am glad, heartily glad, savagely glad, if you like, Aunt Dora. I loved my father too well to be capable of this high-flown humanity of yours. I shall go to see the man hanged if the authorities will let me: and I shall feel happier when I see the drop fall and know that this one merciless villain has gone to his doom. Had he any mercy upon me when he killed my father?'

'All our passions are merciless, Morton,' answered his aunt, whose face and manner had recovered their customary repose. 'God who sees and understands all our evil propensities alone knows how short the distance is between innocence and crime. This unhappy wretch may have been goaded by miseries that neither you nor I can understand. We, who have so many advantages and yet are so prone to fall, ought to be merciful to the outcasts who have never known the light.'

Morton rose impatiently, and began to pace the room, just as he had paced Dulcie's room a few hours before.

'I cannot understand you,' he said. 'You seem to have no memory. Do you forget how my father's blood-bespattered corpse was brought home to this house? I was only ten years old, yet the feeling of that night, with all its horror and agony, are as vividly in my mind as if it were yesterday. I begin to think that no one loved my father as well as I did.'

'I loved him,' answered Aunt Dora quietly. 'You may believe that. I loved him as few brothers are loved. What would I not have done for him? What sacrifice would I have thought too great? My poor boy, you do not know what you are talking about.'

'Forgive me, dear auntie. I know you are all goodness. But I am angry to-night with every one who does not feel this as deeply as I do. I was angry with Dulcie—with Sir Everard.'

'With Sir Everard?' exclaimed Aunt Dora. 'Does he know——?'

'It was to him the wretch declared his crime.'

'How did Sir Everard take the revelation?'

'With provoking coolness. He seemed to think the man an impostor, accusing himself of a crime he had not committed.'

'Such things have happened,' said his aunt thoughtfully.

'Possibly; but this is no case of false accusation. The man was neither drunk nor mad—a brute, but a brute in the full possession of such senses as are given to brutes. Thank God he is in jail, hard and fast, by this time. There will be a trial; his crime will be brought home to him, and he will swing for it. Surely you must be glad of that, Aunt Dora?'

She shook her head with a mournful gesture, and looked at Morton with eyes full of tears.

'Will my dear brother rest any easier in his grave because of his murderer's doom? Will it make the thoughts of that cruel death—so awful, so sudden—a strong man cut down in his pride of manhood, full of thoughts and desires that belong to this world, with no time allowed him for one prayer, one act of faith and love—will that memory be any easier to bear, Morton, because the wretch who did the deed shall have paid the price of his crime? No, my dear boy, there is no satisfaction to me in the idea of human retribution. "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, saith the Lord." I have never doubted that my brother's murderer would be punished for his crime.'

'But do you not see in this event of to-night the finger of Providence? Here is a wretch so goaded by remorse that he is driven to seek death as a relief from the burden of his sin.'

'There must be some remnant of good in the man,' said Aunt Dora musingly. 'Even for him there may be pardon if his repentance be sincere.'

'You would pray for him and with him, I suppose?' said her nephew with a sneer.

'I would, Morton,' she answered quietly; and then, seeing his angry look, she went up to him, and laid her hand gently on his shoulder—such a pretty slender hand, as delicate as a girl's. 'Dear boy, you and I see things with different eyes. You are young and I am old. Time alone can teach the lesson of forbearance and patience under great injuries. And now, dear Morton, go and eat your supper, and try to get a good night's rest. You look worn and weary already, and you will have much excitement and anxiety to go through before this terrible business is finished. Good-night, dear boy; tell your sisters I shall not come back to the drawing-room.'

'Shall I tell them what has happened?'

'Not to-night. I will tell them to-morrow. Let them rest in peace to-night.'

And so Dora Blake dismissed her nephew, and then went back to the hearth above which the dead man's picture hung.

What a frank, bright face it was, smiling down at her, full of the joy and pride of life! Great Heaven, to see it thus, and to remember the ghastly face she had looked upon twenty years ago, the clotted hair, the lifeless form, bemired with duck-weed and clay, just as it had been dragged out of the ditch where the murderer had flung it.

Dora Blake covered her face with her hands, as if to shut out that dreadful image which memory recalled so vividly. She sank shuddering into her chair by the fireside and gave full vent to the passionate grief she had repressed in Morton's presence. He had thought her cold and wanting in love for his dead father. His opinion would have been curiously different if he could have seen her now, the tears rolling down her pale cheeks, her slender form convulsed with sobs.

She grew calm at last, and lay back in her chair exhausted, gazing dreamily at the low fire.

'Thank God it is not as I thought!' she said to herself; 'anything is better than that.'

Presently she rose and unlocked an escritoire, in which she kept all the sacred documents of her life—her diary, valued letters, mementoes of lost friends—all the story of the past, a history which she alone could decipher.

She opened a drawer and took out a packet of letters, tied with a yellow ribbon, and from beneath the letters a crimson morocco miniature case. She came back to her chair by the fire, and sat some minutes in a reverie, with the case and the packet lying in her lap. Then, with a sigh, she drew the lamp nearer to her, and opened the miniature case.

A Parisian photographer had given all the vividness of life to one of the fairest faces that ever challenged his skill. It was a perfect face, lovely alike in feature and expression—smiling, yet with a look of latent sadness, gentle, pleading. The face of a woman born to love, and to be beloved, rather than to dazzle or command; assuredly not the face of a coquette, yet hardly the highest type of womanhood. There was a faint suggestion of weakness in the sensitive lips, the small dimpled chin. It was a countenance of childlike innocence and purity, but with no promise of the grander virtues—heroism, fortitude, self-denial. Dora Blake sat gazing long at the lovely image, lost in a dream of the past.

'How well I could have loved her, poor child,' she sighed. 'How happy we all might have been, if fate had so willed.'

Then, rousing herself from sad, regretful thoughts, she untied the yellow ribbon and looked slowly through the packet of letters. They were in a woman's hand, a small and delicate writing, with many a sentence underlined, as if to give intensity to words which in themselves were passionate. Miss Blake only looked at a page here and there, a line, a phrase, sighing as she read. What vehement, eager life there had been in the writer of those words; how heart and mind had gone with the hand; and yet within a year the hand had been dust, the passionate heart had been still for ever!

'It is too sad a story,' said Miss Blake, as she re-arranged the packet and tied the yellow ribbon round those faded letters —'the history of a broken heart.'

She replaced the packet and the photograph in her drawer, and locked the escritoire.

Presently there came a gentle tap at the door.

'Come in,' said Miss Blake, a little vexed at being disturbed.

The door was opened quietly, and Lizzie Hardman peeped in.

'May I come in for a few minutes, auntie, just to say a word or two?'

'Oh, is it you, child? Yes, you may come. I don't mind you.'

Lizzie crept softly to Aunt Dora's side and put her arm round her neck and kissed her, without a word. Everybody was fond of Aunt Dora, but her nieces used to protest that Lizzie's affection was absurd in its demonstrative devotion. Yet Lizzie Hardman was by no means demonstrative in any other relation of life. Her love for her benefactress seemed the one only warm feeling in her nature.

'She is extremely obliging, and will fetch and carry for us like a dog, and put up with our tempers in the sweetest way,' said Horatia, 'but, in spite of her sweetness, I don't believe she cares a straw for Clementine or me. Her idolatry of auntie is absolutely preposterous.'

'I don't see that, Horry,' answered Tiny; 'Aunt Dora is such a delicious creature. Nobody can help loving her.'

'Yet Aunt Dora might wear damp boots for a whole evening before you would run to fetch her slippers,' retorted Horatia with some justice, for Tiny's weak point was selfishness.

'Well, Lizzie, what do you want?' asked Miss Blake, after she had submitted to the girl's kiss.

'I know something has happened. I was afraid you might be unhappy. Morton looked so pale—so terribly excited. Oh, auntie, is it anything very dreadful, anything that will lead to unhappiness? He said we ought all to be glad: but his own manner was so strange.'

'How anxious you are about Morton.'

'And about you,' said Lizzie; 'you have been crying. I can

see that. Let me go to your room with you, auntie dear, and read you to sleep. I know you will be giving way to sad memories if I don't.'

'Well, you shall come with me if you like, Lizzie. A few pages of Tennyson or Browning will be more soothing than my thoughts. Don't ask me any questions. You will hear everything to-morrow.'

'I can wait,' answered Lizzie.

'Have the girls gone to bed?'

'Half-an-hour ago. Morton had a little supper in the dining-room, very little, it was a mere pretence of eating, and then he went up to his room. He looks dreadfully ill.'

, He has had a shock.'

'Poor fellow! But it is nothing about Miss Courtenay?'

'No, she is unconcerned in the business.'

'That is a blessing,' said Lizzie, as they went slowly up the broad staircase, to the lofty modern-looking corridor from which the bedrooms opened.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE ASSIZE COURT.

HUMPHREY VARGAS had been six weeks in prison, and now the assizes were on at Highclere, and the self-accused murderer has to be judged. The county police had not been idle during the interval. They had hunted up witnesses, and traced out various details in the history of Walter Blake's death which tended to confirm the prisoner's statement, and to establish the fact of his guilt.

Among the lower classes there had been some sympathy for the self-accused, after the Highclere magistrates had heard his confession and committed him for trial. The murder was brutal, and Mr. Blake, of Tangley Manor, had been one of the most popular men in the county. Among the gentry, therefore, the general feeling was that hanging would be only too light a punishment for the murderer; but the working classes dwelt on the fact of the man's surrender of himself after twenty years; his age and infirmities, his dire poverty, the manifold temptations to which a starving wretch is liable. Radical orators in roadside beershops improved the occasion by denouncing the luxury and self-indulgence of the rich.

'Why, there wasn't a horse in Squire Blake's stable as wasn't better fed and better cared for than this pore crittur,' said one of these village Hampdens, lashing himself into a fury. 'Horses, indeed! I should like to know what working man's home can

compare with a loose box in a hunting stable; what working man's child has as comfortable quarters as a fox-hound pup? Ah!' cried the orator, thumping the table, 'the rich man may lay field to field, and add house to house, but at the battle of Armageddon—' and here another thump on the table made the crockery mugs rattle, and closed the speech in sublime obscurity.

The day had come at last when Humphrey Vargas was to stand in the dock, and the little county town of Highclere was in a state of unusual excitement. It was a queer little old-fashioned town, a century behind the times in almost everything, a picturesque little town, with a fine old Norman gateway at each end, narrow streets in which the greater part of the houses had been standing since the days of the Tudors—streets in which the levels had undergone all manner of changes, so that while in one street the houses were elevated ten or fifteen feet above the carriage way, and were approached by a raised causeway, in other thoroughfares the basement floors were sunk several feet below the level of the pavement, and one descended into the house as into a vault.

Daleshire could boast of larger towns and better towns than Highclere. There was Blackford, the great iron town; and there was Avonmore, an elegant modern settlement, where the wealthy Blackfordians retired from the smoke of foundries and the labour of money-making, to clear air and conifer-shaded gardens, and the relaxation of money-spending. There was Doldrum, the busy manufacturing town; famous for glasscloths, round towels, and lawn-mowing machines; where there were two fine churches, and a population of sixty thousand, which subsisted chiefly on pork pies. But superior in size and prosperity as these might be, Highclere had merits of its own, and ranked above them. Everything about it belonged to the Middle Ages—the church, the old gateways, the neighbouring castle, the grammar school, the town hall, the picturesque old one-arch bridge that spanned the narrow river, the verdant water-meadows and willow-shaded streams that surrounded the town—all belonged to the England which is fast passing away: and people with a taste for the picturesque loved the stagnation of Highclere better than the commercial prosperity of dingy Blackford and pork-eating Doldrum, or the wealth and fashion of elegant Avonmore.

The jail where Humphrey Vargas had been in close keeping ever since that October night, was a building hardly worthy of the dignity of Highclere. There was a portion of it that was of immemorial antiquity, and which archæological societies visited and discoursed learnedly about; and there was a portion which was comparatively modern, having been built in the time of Queen Anne. Despite the present rage for all architecture of

that Augustine era, it must be confessed that the modern side of Highclere jail was about as insignificant and paltry a piece of construction as ever was devised by a local architect for the disfigurement of his native town. It was a square block, having for its façade a flat wall, level with the street, and pierced with numerous narrow windows. An enthusiast might have pardoned the ugliness of the edifice, inasmuch as it was built of a dingy red brick, scantily relieved by stone tablets above the windows: but despite this unquestionable merit, Highclere jail was about the ugliest thing in the town, and even the native mind took no pride or pleasure in it.

The ancient portion of the prison was at the back of this modern erection, and was altogether curious and picturesque. It had once been an arsenal, and the massive walls were pierced with narrow loophole windows, which admitted only a glimmering light into the low cells. It was built on the rocky bank of a deep, narrow river, which rushed impetuously six feet below the foundations of the prison. Seen from the low ground on the other side of the stream, the building looked more like a mediæval stronghold than a nineteenth century prison.

Within there was a quadrangle, in which the prisoners took their daily walks, and where executions—happily rare in Highclere—were decently performed.

The morning was gray and drizzly, and the old town looked as dull and gray as the weather, despite the unwonted excitement of a trial for murder. The court was to open at eleven, and at ten o'clock Morton Blake rode into the town, and put his horse up at the 'Peacock,' the old coaching inn, where a range of empty stables testified to a departed prosperity, but which still boasted an assembly room, a professed cook, gave decent dinners, accommodated the sprinkling of hunting men who preferred a quiet life and plenty of space for their horses to the liveliness and fashion of Avonmore, and was honourably known as the best hotel in Highclere.

Morton gave his horse to the ostler, and walked away through the drizzling rain, without entering the inn. He looked pale and careworn. The last six weeks had been full of excitement and anxiety for him. He had been in constant communication with the county police, had followed all their movements with feverish intensity of feeling, and had even employed a London detective on his own account, unknown to the local police. The result of this double investigation had been curiously disappointing. The county police had made numerous discoveries, and were convinced of the prisoner's guilt. The London detective, recommended as a man of exceptional intelligence and capacity, had done nothing save to throw cold water upon the entire business, and to express his doubt of the prisoner's guilt. Disgusted at so barren a result

Morton had dismissed the man in a huff, and pinned his faith upon local talent. And now the day had come upon which Humphrey Vargas was to be tried for his life by a jury of his own countrymen. Morton Blake walked past the assize court where the trial was to be held, past the prison, which lay nearer the gate of the town, under the old archway, with its heraldic griffins on each side of the gate, to the stone bridge which spanned the narrow river that went brawling and gurgling over its rocky bed to find a lower level and to spread and widen at its ease in the water meadows below.

From this bridge Morton could see the back of the jail, and he stood for some time leaning against the parapet, and gazing at the old building, speculating as to which of yonder loopholes lighted Humphrey Vargas's cell. He knew that the prisoner was lodged in that part of the building, though he had paid no visit of mercy or curiosity to his cell. His feelings were too intense to admit of his having any intercourse with the criminal.

He went back to the town and entered the court by a side door, which admitted him into one of the official rooms. He was known to all the local functionaries, and was provided with a seat on the Bench, from which he could survey the whole of the proceedings. The court-house was filling fast, for this trial of Humphrey Vargas was an event which had been awaited with interest and curiosity by everyone in the neighbourhood of Austhorpe. Gentry and commonalty were alike concerned in seeing the issue of to-day's trial. Morton had scarcely taken his seat when Mrs. Aspinall, of the Towers, was ushered to a place near him, and came rustling to her seat, exhaling odours of Ess. bouquet, and exclaiming at the stuffiness of the atmosphere. Lord Blatchmardean and his son, Lord Beville, followed almost immediately, saluting Morton with friendly nods as they took their places, and seizing an early opportunity to shake hands with him, and murmur something vaguely sympathetic.

The body of the old hall was full of people, a crowd which overflowed at the doorway and oozed down the stone steps into the lobbies. Everybody wanted to see the prisoner, to hear what course the trial would take. Would the man plead guilty, and the whole thing be over in a quarter of an hour ; or would the evidence be sifted, and witnesses interrogated in the usual way ? Popular feeling was in favour of a long and careful trial, and there was considerable relief of mind when some one who was supposed to be an authority asserted that the high sheriff of the county had provided the prisoner with counsel, and that he had been instructed to plead not guilty, in order that he might have a fair trial.

'There's Morton Blake,' said a big, jovial-looking man, with a bald head, and large sandy whiskers, who had come late, yet had

contrived to edge himself into one of the best places in the body of the hall on a raised bench just behind the table at which the counsel sat. 'Looks pale and drawn, doesn't he? Takes this business very seriously to heart. And there's Mother Aspinall, grinning at the high sheriff, with those false teeth of hers, and posing herself like a fashionable beauty in a photograph. And there's Sir Everard Courtenay just come in, shaking hands with Morton, and looking like a man whose thoughts are a thousand miles away. And there's old Blatchmardean—regular old roarer—and his son Beville—fine up-standing young fellow, the best bred un in these parts.'

Thus Shafto Jebb, the surgeon of Highclere, who knew everybody present, and was as good as a chorus. He was a hunting man, and although his professional dealings had to do with the ills of humanity, his inclinations pointed to the stable, and he was more horsey in his phraseology than the average veterinary surgeon.

'He's a handsome young man, certainly,' answered the gentleman to whom these remarks had been addressed, Mr. Mawk, a mild young curate, of the advanced Anglican school, who had charge of the rural parish of Austhorpe, while his fettered spirit panted for the freedom of Brighton or Maida Vale; 'but I think Sir Everard Courtenay is even more aristocratic looking—what I should call the true patrician type.'

'Too fine drawn for my taste,' replied Jebb, 'I don't care for your bookish men. I like a fellow who can go across country. Lord Beville is one of the finest riders in Daleshire.'

'Sir Everard used to hunt once, used he not?'

'Twenty years ago. Yes, he was out on the day of Blake's murder. A very poor run, I remember, though some of us took some ticklish fences. It was early in the season, and the hedges were all blind.'

'You remember the day?'

'Better than I remember the day before yesterday. I was a gay young bachelor, and could afford to keep four horses where I now keep two, and hadn't to work half so hard as I do now. Ah, those were glorious days.'

'Not very complimentary to Mrs. Jebb,' simpered Mr. Mawk, the curate.

'Mrs. Jebb is a good soul—no man ever had a better wife. But a man can only be young once, Mawk, and however well things may go with him in after life, he will always look back to the days of his youth with a sigh.'

'I suppose there is no question as to this man's guilt?' speculated Mr. Mawk, who was more interested in the proceedings of the court than in Shafto Jebb's opinions.

'I'll tell you what I think about it when the trial's over,'

answered Jebb warily. 'If I were to go into the witness-box I might be able to put some points in a new light; but I'm not a witness, and I don't want to be one.'

'What could you tell?' asked the curate eagerly. 'Do you really know anything?'

'I might elucidate a point,' said Jebb. 'But let it pass. Here comes the prisoner; looks a poor dough-hearted animal, doesn't he? How savagely Morton Blake eyes him. That young man i awfully vindictive.'

Every eye was now directed to the man in the dock; a haggard, broken-down creature, with bent shoulders, hollow cheeks, long, lean arms, grizzled unkempt hair—a man who looked as if he had been acquainted with starvation and houselessness for the greater part of his life. He looked round the court with a scared, half-dazzled expression, as of one suddenly brought from darkness into light; and then, seeing every eye gazing at him, eager, curious, and unpitying, he gave a shudder, and sank cowering down in a heap in the chair that had been provided for him.

Then the jury were sworn, and the prisoner was arraigned. In answer to the usual interrogation he pleaded not guilty. And then the counsel for the Crown, Mr. Canning Russell, Q.C., briefly stated the facts for the prosecution: how at seven o'clock, on the evening of the twentieth of October, just twenty years ago, Mr. Blake, of Tangley Manor, had been found by some labourers going home from their work, lying dead in a ditch in Austhorpe Lane, his skull fractured by some blunt instrument; how at the coroner's inquest the medical evidence had shown that the fracture of the skull was the cause of death, and that the murderer must have dragged his victim's dead body into the ditch; how the watch, chain, and seals known to have been worn by Mr. Blake on this day, had been discovered three months afterwards at a pawnbroker's in the market town of Great Barford in the next county; and how the pawnbroker who took them in pledge had been able, even after the lapse of twenty years, to select Humphrey Vargas out of six men being exercised in the yard of the prison; how it would be proved to the satisfaction of the jury that the shape of the prisoner's feet, notably the position of the left foot, which turned inward when he walked, had been found to correspond exactly with the drawings taken of foot-marks in the path beside the ditch and in the field beyond it immediately after the murder; how a tramp who had been hop-picking in Kent with Vargas a fortnight prior to the murder, and had known him to be penniless at that time, had met him a week after the murder in Blackford, and had been treated by him at a public-house there, and had reason to know that he was then flush of money. The counsel for the prosecution then went on to say how the police had traced the career of Humphrey Vargas since that time, in

jail and out of jail, an altogether disreputable and criminal existence. Indeed, looking at the mode and manner of the man's life, his associates and surroundings, the wonder in most people's minds would be, not that he had committed one murder, but that he had not committed many.

The first witness called was one whose appearance in the box created considerable excitement in the court, an excitement which was subdued but universal. There was a hush, a breathlessness, a sudden concentration of every one's attention as Sir Everard Courtenay stepped into the witness-box and was sworn.

'A remarkably handsome man,' murmured Mrs. Aspinall, adjusting her binoculars on her aristocratic nose, 'and very young for his age—remarkably well preserved.'

Mrs. Aspinall, who had evaded the approach of gray hairs by dying her tresses a warm tawny tinge, which she called the Titian red, and had coated her wrinkles with a wash of bismuth, might have said with much more truth that Sir Everard looked young because he was not preserved at all, having done nothing to disguise the progress of years, and looking handsomer with his silvered hair and beard than any man ever looked with dyed hair or a wig.

Sir Everard being interrogated told in fewest words how Humphrey Vargas had come to him on the evening of October the twentieth, and had voluntarily made the statement, which he, Sir Everard, had written down, and which the prisoner had afterwards signed in the presence of John Jackson, the constable.

Mr. Tomplin, counsel for the prisoner, asked the witness if Vargas had been drinking when he made this statement.

Sir Everard: No, the man was, to all appearance, perfectly sober.

Mr. Tomplin: And there was nothing wild or excited about his manner?

Sir Everard: I should describe his manner as dogged rather than excited. I was at first inclined to pooh-pooh his statement, believing the whole thing to be a trumped-up business, and that he would recant next day. I afterwards warned him that it was a very serious matter, and that he was putting a rope round his neck. He was a miserable, half-starved looking creature, and I thought that he had been driven by desperation to give himself in charge for an imaginary offence.

Mr. Tomplin: Did he impress you as a man who was mentally weak?

Sir Everard: No. He spoke rationally enough, and he resolutely adhered to his first statement.

Mr. Tomplin: You were a friend of the murdered man, I believe?

Sir Everard : Yes, we were friends of long standing.

Mr. Tomplin : And you rode by his side part of the way home from the hunt ?

Sir Everard : No. I was not among the gentlemen who rode homewards with him as far as the cross roads, after the kill. I went home earlier, and by a different way.

Mr. Tomplin : When and where did you last see him ?

Sir Everard : On Giltspur Common, after a sharp run of twenty minutes or so, when the hounds were at fault, and we waited about a little.

Mr. Tomplin : Did you speak to him ?

Sir Everard : Yes, we talked together for a few minutes.

Mr. Tomplin : Was he in his usual health and spirits ?

Sir Everard looked at the judge with a bored expression, as who should say that this kind of interrogation might go on all day, to no apparent end or aim. Mr. Tomplin was a youngish man, five-and-thirty at most, who had only lately begun to get briefs, and whose enthusiasm required to be kept in check.

'Really now,' said the judge, 'I cannot quite see the drift of these questions. You cannot surely mean to suggest that Mr. Blake committed suicide ? That a gentleman split his own skull with a cudgel, and then laid himself down in a ditch, after picking his own pockets ?'

'No, my lord, but I wish to show that Mr. Blake may have had an enemy ; that this murder, which startled all the country round, and which for twenty years has been a mystery, may have been prompted by stronger and more subtle passions than the sordid craving for gain. I should like the jury to hear something of Mr. Blake's circumstances and surroundings before his death.'

Sir Everard, with a contemptuous smile : Mr. Blake was in his usual health, he appeared to be in particularly good spirits, he conversed freely with his friends.

Mr. Tomplin : Did you, who were his intimate friend, know of any domestic or social trouble in which he was involved at this time ?

Sir Everard : I should say that his domestic surroundings were rather enviable than otherwise. He had been some years a widower, he had three children to whom he was strongly attached, and his house was kept for him by his maiden sister, one of the most amiable women in Daleshire.

Mr. Tomplin : Yet there might have been secret trouble. I am obliged to touch upon a most delicate subject, and I wish to approach it with all possible respect. Is it not a fact, Sir Everard, that Mr. Blake was one of Lady Courtenay's most ardent admirers ?

Sir Everard : When Lady Courtenay was Miss Alice Rothney

she had numerous admirers. I believe Mr. Blake was among them.

Mr. Tomplin: But he conquered his passion when she married you. Do I understand that there was never any uncomfortable feeling between you and Mr. Blake after your marriage?

Sir Everard: Mr. Blake and I were on friendly terms till the day of his death. I have told you that already. I shall be glad, sir, if you can keep my dead wife's name out of this inquiry. It can have no possible bearing on the case.

The judge here intervened, and ruled that the line which the cross-examination was taking was irrelevant, and must be pursued no further.

Humphrey Vargas's deposition was now read, amidst breathless silence, and then John Dyke, a bricklayer's labourer, was sworn.

Mr. Canning Russell: You were one of the men who found Mr. Blake's body. Will you tell the jury exactly what happened to you?

John Dyke: Me and my mate, Joe Daffles, was going home after our day's work at Farmer Twycross's at Austhorpe. We'd been workin' a bit late, for we was puttin' up a new brew-'us,' and Muster Twycross was in a fantig to get it up in time for his October brewin', and he'd made it agreeable to us to work a hour or two overtime; so, as you see, it were after dark when we was agoin' home by Austhorpe Lane. There was a moon up, a newish sort of a moon, that didn't give much light, but just enough for us to see objicks in the road; and we was a joggin' along like, a bit slow, bein' as we was tired, when my mate sees somethin' in the ditch—just at the very identical moment as my eye were caught by a smashed hat lying in a puddle on the other side o' the road, close to Blatchmardean Copse. 'What's this here in the ditch,' says he, scared like. 'Is it a dog or a man?' and he plunges in without more ado, and me after him, and between us drags out something smothered with mud and weeds; it was a man sure enough. We thought at first as it might be somebody that had been overcome with liquor, and had fallen asleep on the bank, and rolled into the ditch promiscuous like, but when we got him out into the road, we could see his red coat and brass buttons and his top boots, and we know'd it was a gent as had been huntin', which a few yards further on we finds his whip lying alongside the footpath. Well, we makes pretty sure as how he'd gone at the hedge and his hoss had throw'd him, and just landed him clean in the ditch. Anyway, he was dead, that was clear enough; so my mate ran back to Austhorpe to get help while I sat down beside the body. He comes back in less than a hour with the constable and another man, and a lantern, and a shutter to carry the body upon, and no sooner does the constable hold the lantern

alongside the dead man's face than he sings out, 'It's Squire Blake of Tangley Manor. Here's a dreadful piece of business—throw'd from his hoss and killed on the spot,' for at first you see, he thought azackly like us. Well, we up with the body and laid it on the shutter, and carried it home to Tangley Manor, where we was 'andsomely recompensed for our trouble.

Mr. Russell: Your mate is dead, I understand?

John Dyke: Yes, sir, pore old Joe took and died seven year ago last Chrisselmas. There never was such a marther to skyatics as Joe were afore he was took.

Mr. Russell: That will do.

The next witness was Dr. Brudenel, of Highclere, a formal old gentleman of a fast-expiring species, the ancient family practitioner. He gave his evidence in a lofty and grandiose manner, and used as many scientific and technical words as he could possibly employ, in order to inform the jury that Mr. Blake had died from the effects of wounds inflicted on the head by a blunt instrument, most probably a stake or cudgel. There had been three wounds, all of a severe character, and sufficient to account for death. There was no doubt in Dr. Brudenel's mind that the deceased expired almost immediately from the effects of one or all of those wounds, and that he was a dead man when he fell or was thrown into the ditch.

In cross-examination Mr. Tomplin asked whether such wounds might not have been caused accidentally by a fall, if Mr. Blake had tried to jump the hedge into the road and had been flung violently out of his saddle.

Dr. Brudenel: I have no hesitation in saying that it would be impossible for three such wounds to be inflicted accidentally. Nor have I any hesitation in saying that no hunting man would take such a jump as you suggest in cold blood, riding home after a day's sport. No judicious rider would take it at any time, as there is a drop of five feet into a hard road.

Mr. Tomplin: You told us just now that, in your opinion, the wounds were inflicted by a cudgel or a stake. Now, would not a wound inflicted by a stake be of a very different character from that caused by a cudgel?

Dr. Brudenel: There would be a difference, certainly.

Mr. Tomplin: A marked difference, would there not?

Dr. Brudenel: The wound inflicted by a stake would be jagged. The flesh would be much abraded, supposing the edge of the stake to be sharp and pointed. The blow from a cudgel would cause a contused wound.

Mr. Tomplin: Now, Dr. Brudenel, were not these wounds obviously caused by a stake?

Dr. Brudenel: That was my impression at the time, an im-

pression which was in some manner borne out by the subsequent discovery of a hole in a bank about a quarter of a mile from the scene of the murder, from which a stake had evidently been recently pulled up, apparently with violence or haste.

Mr. Tomplin: Was the spot in question nearer Austhorpe than the scene of the murder?

Dr. Brudenel: Nearer the Highclere Road.

The counsel for the defence scored a point by Dr. Brudenel's evidence. Humphrey Vargas had described himself as striking Mr. Blake with a cudgel. This suggestion of a stake torn from a hedge near the scene of the murder introduced a new element of doubt into the case.

CHAPTER IX.

GUILTY.

The next witness was a man who had known Humphrey Vargas when he lived at Austhorpe, and who identified him as an agricultural labourer who had worked at one time for Mr. Blake, and had occupied a cottage on his estate. This man described how Vargas had offended Mr. Blake by poaching on the Tangley preserves, and how he and his wife had been turned out of their home, neck and crop, a day or two before the birth of his last child. The wife died within a week of her confinement and Vargas had attributed her death to the agitation and discomfort caused by their sudden shift of quarters, from a decent weather-tight cottage to a wretched hovel in one of the lanes near Austhorpe. He had expressed himself strongly about Mr. Blake's conduct, and had shown himself vindictive. Soon after his wife's death he left Austhorpe, abandoning his young family to the care of the parish. The wife had been a steady, hard-working woman, but Vargas had been scampishly disposed at his best, not an habitual drunkard, but going on the drink at odd times, and inclined to be idle. Of this witness Mr. Tomplin declined to ask any questions.

Then came the evidence of the Great Barford pawnbroker, at whose shop Vargas had pledged Mr. Blake's watch and chain, and who had been able to pick him out from among six men, and identify him, without a minute's hesitation. This witness was searchingly interrogated by Mr. Tomplin, who did all he could to shake his testimony, and to make him appear a twaddling old fool, but without success.

After this followed the evidence of the late police constable of Austhorpe, a toothless old man who had been superannuated twelve years ago, but whose memory seemed unimpaired by time.

He described how he had assisted at the tracing of footprints in the muddy road, hardened by a night's frost, which footprints had been since found to correspond with the form and size of the prisoner's feet with singular distinctness. Here, again, the counsel for the defence tried the forensic art of ridicule, but with no more effect than in the case of the pawnbroker, save so far as the eliciting of some idle laughter from the groundlings.

The next and last witness was the tramp, William Scaffers, otherwise Carrotty Bill, who deposed to being in Vargas's company in the hopfields, near Cobham, in Kent, and parting with him on the road to Daleshire. He described how they had afterwards met by accident in Blackford, and how Vargas had then been flush of coin.

'He'd done a job somewheres in the country as had put a few pounds in his pocket, he ses,' pursued Mr. Scaffers, who discoursed as freely and as pleasantly in the witness-box as if he had been sitting by a taproom fire. His easy attitude, as he lolled with folded arms upon the front of the box, was calculated to assure the jury of his perfect candour and friendliness! He kept a bit of straw at one corner of his mouth, which he chewed occasionally, as if for refreshment, and he occasionally spat, in a gentlemanly manner, upon the floor of the box. 'He stood sam for a pot o' pongelo,' continued Mr Scaffers, 'and narchurly we got talkin'. He told me he meant to go across the 'erring pond and try his luck in Meriky as soon as the winter was over. I arst him if he'd got enough money to pay his passage, and he ses he has; and I ses that must ha' been a profitable job as he'd done in Daleshire; and he ses it were a bit o' luck, and no mistake, and he only wished he could be as lucky every month in the year, and then he wouldn't quarrel with fortune nor with nobody.'

Mr. Tomplin, in cross-examination, bore rather hardly upon the witness, but was able neither to shake Mr. Scaffers' testimony nor to disturb his equanimity. He was quite agreeable to answer any number of questions that might be put to him, and seemed to look upon the whole business as a pleasant chat, which gave free scope to his conversational powers. He explained the meaning of various slang words, which had given colour and vividness to his phraseology. He told the jury that pongelo was a familiar name for half-and-half, and further explained that half-and-half was a mixture of ale and porter. Nothing could be more affable than his manner to the counsel, save perhaps those nods and winks with which he sought to establish an understanding between himself and the jury.

'May I inquire how much of your life has been spent out of jail during the last twenty years?' asked Mr. Tomplin.

'That's a pint of hetiquette for his honour to decide,' an-

swered the imperturbable Scaffers. 'I should call it a hunwarrantable invasion of a gentleman's private life.'

'That will do, sir; I think you have wasted the time of this Court quite long enough,' said Mr. Tomplin shortly.

'I leave it to the jury's own powers to diskiver which of us two has been a fritterin' away their valuable time since eleven o'clock this morning,' answered Scaffers.

This closed the case for the prosecution. Mr. Tomplin then began his defence.

He started by admitting that he had a difficult task before him. Here was a man who stood before them self-accused of a terrible crime, whose own lips had given the chief evidence against him; a man who had of his own free will surrendered his liberty and invited the last punisment which the law could inflict. Yet in the face of this confession he should ask the jury to consider the case before them with minds unprejudiced by the prisoner's own statement, and to examine that statement as if it had been the evidence of an independent witness. He asked them to consider that there was actually nothing in all they had heard to-day to connect the prisoner with the murder of Walter Blake, though there was certainly some ground for believing that he had become possessed of the murdered man's watch and chain, and had converted them for his own benefit.

'You have been told by Dr. Brudenel,' pursued Mr. Tomplin, 'that in his opinion, both at the time of the inquest and at the present time, the wounds from which Mr. Blake died were inflicted by a sharp-edged, jagged piece of wood, such as a hedge-stake, and not by the smooth knob of a cudgel. I ask you, gentlemen, to consider this point in the evidence; and I ask you still more closely to consider the palpable improbabilities in the tale told by the prisoner. You are asked to believe that he, a half-starved tramp, footsore and weary, was able to stop Mr. Blake, a powerful man, mounted on a powerful horse; that he was able to drag him off his horse and so belabour him with a cudgel that he died. Does it not seem more reasonable to suppose, gentlemen, that the murderer of Mr. Blake was a man of his own age, of powerful frame, like his own, mounted as well as he was mounted, able to attack him upon equal terms; not a poor crawling hound whom the squire of Tangley could have swept out of his path as he would have spurned any four-footed cur that yelped and snapped at his horse's legs? Gentlemen, you have to look deeper than this starving wayfarer's hunger for the motive of this crime. You have to look for a great wrong and a desperate revenge. You have to look for one of those terrible domestic mysteries which underlie the smooth surface of society. You have to scrutinize the garbled page before you and to read between the lines.

'And now, gentlemen, as for the motive of this confession—the motive which can impel a man, at large, unsuspected, free to breathe the air of heaven, to give up his liberty and imperil his life? I think you will find it easier to discover a motive, or motives, strong enough to induce an innocent man to accuse himself of a crime which he has not committed, than to reconcile the improbabilities in the prisoner's account of a supposed murder. We all know of that thirst for notoriety which exists in some uneducated minds—a morbid desire to astonish—to be talked about and pointed at and thought famous, were it after the vilest fashion. Such a desire may have influenced the prisoner when he leapt in a moment from the dull obscurity of want and houselessness to the distinction of a supposed murderer: a man to be interviewed by newspaper correspondents, and to have his portrait in the penny dreadfuls. Gentlemen, we make too much of our criminals. There is a Victoria Cross for crime, as there is for valour. A man springs into fame as surely by the commission of a monstrous crime as a general by winning a great battle. We have made a step towards civilization by doing away with public hangings; but we shall make a longer step into the light when we cease to gloat over the details of crime, and to award the glory of a waxwork apotheosis to the thief and the assassin. The thirst for notoriety, gentlemen, is one obvious motive for such a confession; add to this the desperation of a wretch whose only freedom was the liberty to starve by the wayside or to rot in a ditch. Perhaps, had the workhouse been more accessible, Humphrey Vargas would not have thrown himself into jail; but who would hesitate, as a mere question of personal comfort, between the casual ward and the convict prison? Homeless, in rags, starving, Vargas saw but one certain refuge open to him, and that refuge was a jail. He had tasted its comforts before as a common felon; he pined for the more indulgent treatment given to a murderer. He reckoned on the chances against the extreme penalty of the law. He argued with himself that an old man moved by remorse, penitent, abject, confessing to a crime committed twenty years ago, would be sure of lenient treatment. Mercy would intervene to modify the severity of the sentence. He risked the hazard of the die, and stands before you to-day, bearing on his countenance the stamp of his character, a product of our nineteenth century civilization, untaught, unfed, unclothed, uncared for, a creature whose final hope on earth is the decent shelter of a jail.'

Mr. Canning Russell replied with sober brevity to the arguments for the defence. He said that a man who accused himself of a murder was, unless mad or drunk at the time of his confession, supposed to know his own mind. This man had

been neither drunk nor mad. He had given a consecutive narrative, a narrative sustained by the evidence, medical and otherwise. Mr. Russell alluded with some contempt to the nice distinction between a wound from a stake and one caused by a bludgeon or cudgel.

'Gentlemen,' he exclaimed, 'I do not believe the whole College of Surgeons would be able to tell one from the other.'

He dwelt on the identification of the prisoner by the pawnbroker to whom he had pledged Mr. Blake's watch and chain. This was conclusive evidence as to the robbery, and was it not too much for any reasonable mind to suppose that the robbery and the murder were two distinct crimes committed by two distinct criminals, each acting independently of the other? Surely the man who disposed of Mr. Blake's property must be the man who murdered him for the sake of that property. He had to remind the jury what very small gains had been the motive of murder in many cases that must have come within their knowledge. As to the argument that a tramp, on foot, was no match for Mr. Blake on horseback, it had to be considered that the tramp was a man who had led a rough out-of-door life, and belonged already, in a measure, to the criminal classes, a man whose thews and sinews were practised in deeds of violence, and further, that a gentleman, walking his horse home from the hunt after a long day's hard riding, could hardly be in the full possession of his normal strength, but was in all likelihood exhausted and weary.

Mr. Russell concluded, after briefly glancing at some further points in the defence, and then the judge summed up, briefly, severely, taking care to remind the jury that the fact of a crime having been committed twenty years ago was no extenuating circumstance, that the prisoner's remorse could in no wise lessen the enormity of his guilt; that if it seemed to them that he had done this deed of which he stood accused out of his own mouth, he must pay the penalty of his crime. His case had been carefully heard. He had been ably and exhaustively defended. They were not to be carried away by oratory. They were not even to be influenced by natural pity for a wretch so abject. Their duty was to arrive at their verdict upon the evidence they had heard, looking at plain facts in the sober light of common sense.

The jury retired, and in less than twenty minutes returned to the box, and after the usual formalities the jury returned the verdict 'guilty.'

Then came the solemn closing act of the day. The judge put on the black cap and addressed the prisoner. Coldly, gravely, he reminded the shivering wretch of the magnitude of his crime, and told him what his fate was to be. There had been no

recommendation to mercy from the jury. There was no hint of a possible commutation of the sentence from the judge. The short winter day had worn to its close before this climax was reached; wax candles had been lighted here and there, and the yellow flames were reflected on the black oak panelling as in turbid water. The faces in the crowded court had all the same wan, strained look in the dim and unequal light. There were strange effects of light and shade, as in a picture by Rembrandt. The figures of the officials moving to and fro in the dusk had a goblin look. The judge projected a monstrous shadow of his wig and gown upon the ceiling. The dark crimson draperies looked black, as if the court had been draped for a funeral.

Mrs. Aspinall shook out the sable tails on the edge of her mantle and gave a shuddering sigh.

'I had no idea the trial of a poor common creature could be made so interesting,' she said to Sir Everard Courtenay, who sat near her. 'How wonderfully clever those counsel are, and how warmly they enter into it; just as if they really cared what became of the poor creature, don't you know? But I'm rather glad it's all over, as I ordered my carriage for four o'clock, and those poor chestnuts of mine must have been shivering for the last three-quarters of an hour. Would it be too much for me to ask you to see me through the crowd?'

'I shall be delighted,' said Sir Everard.

'Your pretty little daughter ought to have been here to-day,' observed the frivolous matron; 'she has lost a treat.'

'I should be very sorry for my daughter to see such a painful scene.'

'But really, now; it was all so quietly done, and those barristers are such gentlemanly creatures. There was nothing to offend the most sensitive mind.'

'Perhaps not; but I am glad Dulcie was out of it,' replied Sir Everard gravely. 'May I offer you my arm?'

He led the lady to her carriage, which was waiting in front of the assize court.

'Shall I drive you home?' asked Mrs. Aspinall, when she was seated in her snug brougham, 'It won't be far out of my way to go through Austhorpe.'

'You are very good, but I have my horse here, and I must ride home as fast as I can to dress for the sheriff's dinner.'

'You are going to dine with Sir Nathaniel?'

'Yes, I am to meet the judge and the leading counsel.'

'And you will have a delightful opportunity of talking over the trial. I quite envy you. Shall you ride home by Austhorpe Lane, past the scene of the murder?'

'Naturally, since that is the shortest way and the best road.'

'Have you not a vague fear of seeing Walter Blake's ghost as you pass the spot to-night?'

'I have passed the spot any time for the last twenty years, and have seen no ghost.'

'But this evening, when your mind is full of the poor man, might not imagination conjure up his image?'

'I leave the enjoyment of a vivid imagination to your more impressionable sex, Mrs. Aspinall. Mine is not lively enough to shape poor Blake's ghost out of the mists of evening.'

'"Shadows to-night have struck more terror to the soul of Richard than can the substance of ten thousand soldiers,"' quoted Mrs. Aspinall laughingly. 'Are you made of sterner stuff than crook-backed Dick? But you have not his guilty conscience, and that makes all the difference. When are you going to bring Dulcie to dine with me?'

'Whenever you like to ask us.'

'But that is always. You have a standing invitation to drive over and dine at the Towers in a friendly, impromptu way, and you never come. You are asked to formal dinners, and you have always some excuse for refusing. You are a positive hermit!'

'I own to a love of my own fireside, but I like pleasant society also. May I bring Dulcie to-morrow, if you are going to be at home?'

'I shall be charmed.'

'The usual quarter to eight, I suppose?'

'Yes; good-night. I am so glad.'

They shook hands, and the brougham drove off, leaving Sir Everard standing in front of the assize court, the observed of the little crowd waiting to see the notabilities come out. He walked briskly off to the 'Peacock' to get his horse, and found Morton Blake in the stable yard, on the same errand.

'Well, Morton, are you satisfied now?' he asked.

'Yes, I suppose I am satisfied; and yet I have a curious feeling of incompleteness in the whole thing, as if there were something yet wanting—as if we had reached only a preliminary stage in the discovery of the truth. Can there be anything behind, do you think, Sir Everard? Had this man an accomplice? Was he the tool of a greater villain?'

'My dear Morton, the whole story seems obvious and commonplace to the last degree—a starving wretch by the wayside—brutalized by ignorance and want—ready to commit any crime in order to prolong his worthless life.'

'My mind has been troubled by the counsel's suggestions of a deeper motive—a mystery underlying the apparently commonplace story.'

'My dear fellow, the counsel was paid to talk. He had to set

up some kind of defence, to suggest a doubt where there was no room for doubt. Having no case, and being a man of small experience, he indulged his oratorical powers at the expense of common sense. Shall we ride home together?'

'If you please.'

Their horses had been brought out by this time. They mounted and rode under the old archway, beneath which so many a stage coach had rattled and rumbled in the days before railways. They rode slowly through the narrow town to the wide highroad, bordered on each side by grassy strips of waste land, from which Austhorpe Lane diverged.

They rode at a sharp trot after they left the town, and only pulled up their horses as they approached Blatchmardean Copse, near the scene of the murder.

'My dear Morton, it grieves me to see you so depressed,' said Sir Everard, as they walked gently past the little wood. 'All has been done that can be done. Justice is satisfied. Why should the loss and sorrow of twenty years ago, the grief of your childhood, be suffered to cloud your manhood with gloom? It is hardly fair to my poor little Dulcie that you should abandon your mind to one all-absorbing idea. She has had very little happiness from your society since her last sad birthday.'

'Yes, I know I am wrong,' answered the younger man. 'I have brooded too much upon the past. But now, as you say, justice will be done. I ought to be satisfied. I fancy that no son, whose father—a loving and beloved father—died as mine died, could ever completely put aside his grief for that loss. But I will not yield in an unmanly way to that morbid feeling. My father is avenged. That ought to be enough for me. I hope you understand that through all the trouble and excitement of the last six weeks my love for Dulcie has not been a jot the less real and true because I have kept myself aloof from her. I would not cloud her fair young life with my sorrow, and I could not take life lightly or pleasantly during that period of suspense. To-night I will put all trouble out of my mind, and will make myself happy in my darling's society.'

This was said with a manly frankness, of which Sir Everard could but approve. They had passed the scene of the murder while Morton was speaking, and his companion saw the young man's shrinking glance at the weedy ditch, the steep bank, and the pollard oak above it, whose bare branches stood sharply out against the gray evening sky, a perpetual sign to mark the fatal spot.

What a happy evening that was for gentle Dulcie. She was near the gate waiting for her father's coming as the two men rode into the avenue, a graceful little figure in a furred jacket, with the pale gold of her hair just visible under a coquettish little fur hat.

Morton alighted quickly, and was by her side before she had recovered from her surprise at seeing him.

'I thought you were never coming here any more,' she said, it being something less than a week since his last visit.

'I did not care to come often while I had trouble on my mind, Dulcie. But now it is all over, I am your slave again.'

'Is the poor man going to be hanged?' asked Dulcie.

'Yes.'

'I am——' she was going to say sorry, but checked herself, warned by Morton's angry glance, and slipped her hand lightly under his arm as they walked side by side to the house. 'I am glad your suspense and trouble are over,' she concluded.

'We have only half-an-hour to spend with you, Dulcie,' said Sir Everard. 'I have to dress for the sheriff's dinner, and I dare say Morton is anxious to get home and tell his people the result of the trial.'

'I am never anxious to leave Dulcie,' answered Morton, 'but I have no doubt my womenkind are impatient for tidings.'

'I shall just have time to give you some tea,' said Dulcie. 'Poor things, how tired and worn out you must be! Did you get any luncheon?'

'There was an interval for luncheon, but neither Morton nor I eat any.'

'Then you shall have some sandwiches. Our cook has a particular talent for sandwiches. She is almost as good as a German. I suppose you know that the Germans have a hundred and fifty different kinds of sandwiches, Morton?'

'I blush to say that I was unaware of their profound art in that line.'

'Oh, they are a great people. The greatest Egyptologists, fiddle-players, and cooks in the world.'

'Provided always that you like German cookery,' said Morton.

Dulcie was in high spirits, delighted at getting her lover back again, forgetting for once in her life to be sorry for a woe that came within her ken. She gave Scroope her orders about the tea. It was to be something sumptuous in the way of afternoon teas. There were to be sandwiches and cake, and some of those gigantic Australian grapes which were just now in their highest beauty.

There was a noble fire of logs in Dulcie's room, a blaze that lit up the pots and pans and dark oak walls, and Japanese cabinets, and high-art piano. The double octagon table was drawn near the hearth, the tea-tray was there already, an old silver circular tray, on a fringed crimson-and-white damask cloth. Everything that wasn't Japanese was early English, or at least as early as Queen Anne's time. Never did a room look prettier, or more comfortable on a cold winter evening.

Morton went to his favourite chair in the corner screened by the projecting chimney piece, and seated himself with an air of unqualified enjoyment. He forgot everything except that he was with Dulcie.

Sir Everard sank into his deep arm-chair without a word. He left the young people to be happy after their own manner. But with Dulcie her father was always foremost.

'How tired you look, dearest,' she said, leaning over him and taking his hand, 'and how feverish your hand is! Such a long day, and the ride home in the cold, have been too much for you.'

'Yes, dear, I am rather tired. The atmosphere of the court was horrible, enough to cloud any man's brain. No wonder there is a good deal of nonsense talked in law courts occasionally. The counsel are half asphyxiated. Don't look so anxious, Dulcie. I am only tired. There is nothing else amiss with me.'

'You had better not go to the dinner, father.'

'My love, the dinner will do me good. I want the reaction of lively society after the gloom of to-day.'

'Do you mean that the judge and the counsel will be lively, papa—the judge after having condemned a man to be hanged?'

'Do you think they ought to be in mourning for him, Dulcie, or that the judge should wear the black cap at dinner?'

'No, papa, but I cannot imagine any judge with proper feeling going into society and making merry after having doomed a man to death.'

'Poor Dulcie. The judges are made of harder stuff than little girls like you. They go into society, and eat and drink, and talk wisely or wittily, as the case may be; and I believe the hanging judges are generally the greatest *bons-vivants*.'

Dulcie sighed, and began to pour out the tea. Morton, who in her smiles had forgotten all his troubles, did ample justice to the German sandwiches and hot-house grapes, and drank numerous cups of tea—or perhaps, as the pretty Japanese cups were very small and shallow, it may be said that he drank one dish of tea in several instalments. Sir Everard would eat nothing. He lay back in his chair, silent, prostrate, after the excitement of the day.

CHAPTER X.

A SUPERIOR WOMAN.

THE honourable Mrs. Aspinall was a lady who had made the journey of life with a fixed determination of always taking the lead of her fellow-travellers. She had occupied the box seat on the coach, as it were, and had required an extra amount of attention from coachman and guard. She had such a boundless

faith in her own superiority that she had finally succeeded in making other people believe too. 'This man will do great things,' said Mirabeau of Robespierre, 'because he believes in himself.' Mrs. Aspinall's high estimation of her own merits had enabled her to reach the top of that particular tree on which she desired to perch ; and, once having gained her place, she knew how to keep it.

She was not the wealthiest or the most aristocratic woman in the county. She was neither the handsomest nor the cleverest ; but, by adopting a leading tone, by talking of herself always as if she were first and foremost, by the calm arrogance with which she put down other people and asserted her own opinions, she had contrived to achieve social leadership. She had invested herself with the regal mantle and put on the crown, and nobody had the courage, or perhaps the inclination, to pluck them off. Of the lady's hereditary claim to distinction society knew very little. The honourable Thomas Aspinall, as a younger son of Lord Riverdale, was a sprig of nobility ; but his wife Sir Bernard Burke described briefly as Calphurnia, younger daughter of Patrick O'Ryan, Esq., Holly Hill, County Cork. This might mean anything or nothing, said Society, slavishly submitting to pretensions for which it could discover no adequate basis. The honourable Thomas had gone to his place in the family vault fifteen years ago, and Mrs. Aspinall had enjoyed all the privileges of unfettered widowhood ever since. She had no children to occupy her time and make her acquainted with care, to sponge upon her limited income and remind people of her age by their ridiculously rapid growth. She was free to live her own life, and her life was essentially selfish. She had not been unflattered by matrimonial offers during her long widowhood ; but among her various suitors there had been no one able to give her a better position than she enjoyed as a widow : and the deaf adder was never more indifferent to the voice of the charmer than was Mrs. Aspinall to the pleading of a lover who had no substantial advantages to sustain his suit.

Her income was not large, but it just sufficed, with careful management, for the lady's personal wants, and enabled her to head all those subscription lists which have a local importance, and are seen by everybody. She had the use for her life of Aspinall Towers, a roomy old house in a park of considerable extent, but sparsely timbered, the late Lord Riverdale having considerably denuded his various seats and manors of such useless excrescences as oaks, elms, and beeches. The house was big, and draughty, and cold. It had been last furnished early in the reign of George the Third, and the chairs and tables were all of that angular and spindle-legged character which is now accepted as your only beauty in cabinetmaker's work. Mrs.

Aspinall declared that everything had been made by the renowned Chippendale ; and she rejoiced inwardly at a revolution in taste which enabled her to be in the height of the fashion without putting her hand in her pocket to buy anything new. Even the faded colouring of her curtains and chair covers, a kind of pallid mouldiness which pervaded everything in the house, was artistic ; and Mrs. Aspinall had the satisfaction of saving money, while she sneered at the glowing crimsons and peacock greens to be found in the mansions of the newly rich.

On the morning after the trial Mrs. Aspinall began to busy herself at an early hour with her preparations for that friendly little dinner which Sir Everard Courtenay had promised to eat with her. Although essentially selfish and self-indulgent, she was not lazy. No idle person could have acquired the position she had taken upon herself, or maintained it upon her narrow means. She liked work. She had a tremendous stock of energy which had to be got rid of somehow. She found as much enjoyment in an active life, a perpetual moving to and fro—managing, calling, letter-writing—as women of lymphatic temper find in lolling in a soft nest beside the fire, reading a novel.

To-day she had much to do in a few hours. She wanted this dinner of to-night to be as pleasant as it was possible for a dinner to be. She had been trying her hardest—and she was a woman of exceptional persistency—to get Sir Everard and his daughter to the Towers in a friendly, familiar way, and heretofore she had failed. Sir Everard had dined six years ago at one of her grand dinners. Dulcie had gone to one of her lawn parties, under Miss Blake's wing, and chiefly to please Morton ; but here it had ended. In vain had Mrs. Aspinall plied the baronet and his daughter with every variety of invitation. Sir Everard pleaded that he rarely went anywhere, and had lost all relish for society. Dulcie urged in excuse for frequent refusals that she did not care to go out without her father.

But now, in a yielding moment, Sir Everard had promised to come, and Calphurnia determined that having once given way he should give way again, until he became as wax in her hands.

'A man like that would be worth listening to,' the widow told herself, remembering those ineligible suitors whom she had dismissed so coolly.

'I must have some one to meet them, Pawker,' she said to a genteel drudge, who combined the offices of stillroom maid, needlewoman, and lady's maid, under the ladylike appellation of companion. Just fourteen years ago this long-suffering Pawker, then hovering between girlhood and womanhood, and with a fresh-coloured, pleasing appearance, had advertised her willingness to be generally useful in the character of companion to a lady of position, and her further willingness to accept a small

salary, her chief object being to secure a comfortable home. Miss Pawker was the eldest daughter of a struggling parson, and it had of late been made clear to her that her presence in the family circle was regarded rather as a burden than as a blessing.

Mrs. Aspinall answered the advertisement, and invited the young lady, whose paternal home was only ten miles on the other side of Blackford, to come to the Towers for a preliminary interview. There was not a word about railway expenses, but Miss Pawker was deeply moved by the address of Aspinall Towers, and the gorgeous blending of gold and colour in the lady's monogram. Louisa's greatest weakness was a worship of rank and style—a craving for the society of fashionable people; and the name of Mrs. Aspinall was delightfully familiar to her in the local newspapers as one of the leaders of county fashion. She paid for her second-class return ticket willingly, though the purse from which the money came was but scantily furnished, and she made her difficult journey across country to Highclere, whence a fly, at the fearful expenditure of half-a-guinea, carried her to Aspinall Towers.

It was a bleak, blowy October day, and though Louisa was awed by the grim gray towers, with their narrow windows and machicolated parapets, flanking a long gray house, and by the extent of the park through which she approached this stony mansion, she could but feel that the place altogether looked shivery, and that for every-day comfort the cosy little village vicarage, with its holly-hedged garden and single paddock, was a better place to live in. But Louisa panted for style, and here was a style far beyond anything to which her aspiring mind had soared. Those towers, this park, thrilled her. 'It is positively ducal!' she exclaimed to herself, enraptured at the thought that it might be her lot to inhabit that mediæval mansion.

A crimson footman handed her over to a butler in irreproachable black, and by that functionary she was conducted to Mrs. Aspinall's morning room—a spacious apartment with pale salmon-coloured walls, and a white-and-salmon cornice of elaborate design—a room which would have looked warmer and more comfortable with a little more furniture in it. The intensely Chippendale chairs and tables had a pinched and shrunken appearance on this chilly morning.

Mrs. Aspinall received the stranger with a kind of off-hand friendliness which struck Louisa as the essence of good breeding.

'Come and sit by the fire,' she said, 'and put your feet on the fender. You look blue with cold.'

Louisa had been taught to consider it a social crime to put her foot on a fender. The home fenders had been sacred. But at Mrs. Aspinall's request she timidly rested the sole of her stout country-made boot on the edge of the brass fender, while that

lady, seated opposite, perched her gold-rimmed binoculars on the bridge of her nose, and scrutinized Miss Pawker from head to foot.

'Now, my dear, what can you do?' asked Mrs. Aspinall in a business-like tone, when she had finished her survey. 'Are you accomplished—play, sing, speak French, Italian, German; paint flowers and landscapes——?'

'Oh, dear, no, madam,' exclaimed Louisa, reddening and looking frightened. 'If I were able to do all that I should have gone out as a finishing governess, and should have hoped to earn a hundred guineas a year.'

'I see. You have no accomplishments: and because you can do nothing you think yourself the proper person to go out as companion to a lady of position.'

Louisa's blood seemed to freeze in her veins. Had she paid seven and elevenpence for her railway ticket, waited ever so long at those shelterless cross-country junctions, and finally expended ten shillings on a flyman who made it a favour to convey her to her destination, in order to be lectured by the honourable Mrs. Aspinall, and sent home with a sense of her own incapacity?

'I hope,' she faltered, 'that although I am not universally accomplished I have the power to make myself useful and agreeable in a lady's household. My sisters and I were educated at home, and my father, a country vicar, could not afford us the advantage of governess or masters. We learnt all my mother could teach us. It is only lately that I have thought of taking a situation, but I certainly fancied myself qualified for the post I seek. I can play a little, sing a little, know a little French, am a good hand at all kinds of plain and fancy needlework.'

'Can you turn a gown, and make a bonnet?' asked Mrs. Aspinall.

'I always make and remake my own gowns, and sometimes make my own bonnets.'

'I'm glad of that. I might now and then want you to be useful in that way. I have my own maid, of course, but as she has to assist in the housework I may want a little extra help now and then. I couldn't wear anything made by a country dressmaker, and when I don't care to order a gown straight from Worth I like to get one thrown together at home.'

'I should be always delighted to be useful,' replied Miss Pawker, not foreseeing to what she was pledging herself.

'So you say in your advertisement; but it's just as well to have these matters clearly understood. Do you like reading aloud?'

'I am used to it.'

'That's better, as I shan't be afraid of tiring you when I want the *Times* and *Post* read to me of an evening. You are fond of flowers, I suppose?'

'Passionately.'

'Then it will be an amusement to keep my jardinières and window boxes in order, and to potter about with your garden scissors and the watering can in the conservatories.'

This sounded home-like and pleasant, almost like being treated as a daughter of the house.

'That kind of work would delight me,' said Miss Pawker.

'I thought so. And then I should want you to give your attention to table decoration—the arrangement of a dessert, for instance. Butlers are so narrow-minded and clumsy. You and I could hit upon new ideas, and infuse a little poetry into the business.'

'I should be charmed to assist.'

'With regard to your meals,' pursued Mrs. Aspinall, now contemplating the vicar's daughter dreamily, as she lay back in her chair, 'I think it would be as well for you to dine when I take my luncheon, and take your tea and supper in a snug little sitting-room of your own, which I should contrive to spare you, as I know you would appreciate the privilege of a private sitting-room. This would leave the evening free to both of us. If I wanted you to come and read or play to me, or chat with me, you could come. If I didn't, you could amuse yourself in your own way—write letters, or novels—most young ladies write novels, and it must be very amusing for them, and not too expensive, now the duty is taken off paper, so long as they don't publish them.'

All this was said with an agreeable familiarity that enchanted Miss Pawker.

'And now there is the question of salary. If I were inclined to make bargains I should say that a young lady who is absolutely inexperienced ought not to expect any salary for the first two or three years of her engagement; but as I like to be good-natured to young people, I'll waive the question of inexperience, and you shall start with a small salary. Now, what is your idea of a small salary?'

'I have thought that thirty pounds a year——' faltered Louisa.

'Thirty pounds!' screamed Mrs. Aspinall. 'My poor child, are you aware that in Great Britain and Ireland alone there are ever so many million surplus women? Do you know that feminine labour is a drug in the market; that if I were to advertise for a companion I should be inundated with applications from young ladies wanting to come to me for nothing? Pray, my dear, be reasonable! Twenty pounds a year, with the moderate use of my laundry, no frilled petticoats or white muslin gowns, is the very utmost I could afford to give you.'

Louisa hesitated, and looked dubiously round at the Chippen-

dale furniture, the hot-house flowers in old Satsuma jars, the black-and-gold Japanese screen, the salmon-coloured walls. It was all very elegant, refined, aristocratic ; but twenty pounds a year was a poor pittance ; and that restriction about frilled petticoats and muslin gowns was galling. Then she comforted herself with the thought that she had only one frilled petticoat in her wardrobe ; and then she reflected how nice it would be to live with such a friendly, easy-tempered person as Mrs. Aspinall, and to see those machicolated battlements every time she looked out of the window, and to walk in that extensive park. She felt that it would be something to pass all at once into an aristocratic atmosphere, to be waited upon by a footman in crimson plush, instead of the red-elbowed housemaid at home.

'Well, my dear,' said Mrs. Aspinall, breaking sharply on the girl's reverie, 'will it do for you?'

'Yes, if you please, madam. I think, if you feel that I can please you, I should like to come.'

'Of course you can please me. That is a matter within your own volition. If you are accommodating and industrious—a very early riser, by-the-bye, that is indispensable—and sweet-tempered, and quiet in all your ways, I am sure we shall get on. You may come to me early next week. I know all about your people, so there need be no worry about references. And now you shall have some tea and bread and butter before you go back to the station.'

So Louisa sat with her feet on the fender, and was regaled with strong tea and delicious home-made bread and butter, and unconsciously sold herself into bondage. She had now been with Mrs. Aspinall fourteen years ; and yet she was not altogether unhappy. Mrs. Aspinall, though freely spoken of in the servants' hall as a Tartar, had never been positively unkind to Louisa Pawker. There was no motive for unkindness where the slave was so willing or so submissive.

CHAPTER XI.

A FRIENDLY DINNER.

'We must have some one to meet them,' repeated Mrs. Aspinall. 'Morton Blake must come, of course, as he is engaged to Miss Courtenay. Write him a little note, Pawker, like a good soul, and say that he is to be here at a quarter to eight to meet his sweetheart, while I write to Lady Frances Grange. You'd better ring the bell first, or run down to the hall—that will be quicker—and tell John to order the groom to get ready to carry some letters immediately.'

Miss Pawker ran to execute this errand. She was always

running up and downstairs to save the servants time or trouble, and was as lean and active as a middle-aged Mercury.

'Dearest Fan,' wrote Mrs. Aspinall, who had long ago assumed an affectionate authority over Lord Blatchmardean's motherless daughter, as if she had been a godmother, or as if the girl had been committed to her care by a dying mother. 'I want you and your brother to come and make yourselves eminently agreeable this evening. Sir Everard Courtenay and his daughter—and I hope his daughter's lover—are to dine here *en famille*. Come, dear, and look your brightest and prettiest, and sing your delicious French ballads, and be the life of the evening. I know there is a meet on to-day, and I dare say you and Lord Beville will be over half the county between this and dusk, but I will take no excuse for your non-appearance here at a quarter to eight.'

The groom went off with the letters on one of Mrs. Aspinall's gray cobs, and the lady and her companion began their preparations for the evening. Mrs. Aspinall was an early bird, and had despatched her invitations before nine o'clock, knowing that Lady Frances and her brother would leave Blatchmardean before ten.

'Now, Pawker, my dear, you must exercise all your taste, and make my rooms lovely,' said the lady. 'The dinner table must be artistic and novel. Let there be a lowish mass of scarlet geraniums and white chrysanthemums in the middle, and a feathery fringe of ferns for a border. Then we will use the old Charles the Second engraved glass, which Mr. Aspinall's mother left me. Poor dear soul, it wasn't much, but it was kindly meant. The old Leeds dessert set will do. It has a homely look, yet is exquisitely artistic. Run down, and set about your preparations, my dear, and send me up Jolfish.'

Jolfish was cook and housekeeper, so-called for dignity, since Mrs. Aspinall was far too keen a manager to let her housekeeping be done by any one but herself. Jolfish was obese and slow, but a good cook, and passing honest. She had never wronged her mistress by so much as a basin of dripping, and it was well for Jolfish that she had not.

'Now, my dear Jolfish,' said Mrs. Aspinall, ever so sweetly, for the cook had her little tempers, and did not like dinner parties that came upon her unawares, or 'unbeknownst,' as she called it. 'I want you to send me up the prettiest little dinner you ever served in your life.'

'When might it be, mum? Next week?

'No, Jolfish, this evening.'

'Lor, mum, what can I do for this evening? You ain't got no company this evening, have you, mum? I'd got my dinner all laid out in my mind. A filleted sole, and a dish of cutlets

with shampinions, and one of them grouse Lord Blatchmardean sent you.'

'That would have done charmingly, Jolfish, if I had been alone. But I want a nice little dinner for six.'

And then Mrs. Aspinall, who was a genius at the composition of a bill of fare, lightly sketched the ground-plan of a little dinner which would have satisfied the ideas of a club-house *chef*, or a professional diner-out. Jolfish was as objective as she dared be; prophesied that there wouldn't be such a thing as turbot to be heard of at Highclere; that the price of fowls would be ruinous; or that the birds would be old and tough; that it was a fortnight too early for a turkey poult, and ridiculous to expect oysters. Her mistress over-ruled every objection, and dismissed Jolfish with a smile.

'I shall want a deal of wine for all them gravies and the soup,' said Mrs. Jolfish, lingering on the threshold.

'Browse shall give you a bottle of sherry, and a tumbler of port, and be sure your clear soup tastes of something more than wine and water.'

The cook hoped she had made clear soup before in her life, but as she expressed that aspiration in a murmur, Mrs. Aspinall affected not to hear it.

Browse appeared an hour later, bearing two notes on a parcel-gilt salver. One from Morton Blake, 'delighted,' &c., the other from Lady Frances.

'Yes, you most indefatigable woman, we'll come, since you make a point of it. But don't be angry if we both begin to look sleepy before the evening is half over, for we expect a big day with the South Daleshire. 'Yours always,

'F. G.'

Mrs. Aspinall spent her morning cosily by the fire in her salmon-coloured sitting-room, writing letters, regulating her accounts, and reading the last fashionable autobiography. She was a woman who diligently improved her mind with new books. She read memoirs, travels, reviews, political essays on occasion, and even a little science. Her opinions and ideas were as new and fashionable as her gowns and bonnets, and she passed for a woman of some culture. But if you had asked her about De Quincey or Lamb, La Bruyère, Pascal, Montaigne, she would have rewarded you with a blank stare. She thought Byron an ephemeral versifier who had achieved a brief notoriety by the audacity of his opinions and the looseness of his morals.

Miss Pawker appeared at luncheon after a morning's elegant drudgery. She had decorated drawing-room, ante-room, and dinner table with every available flower, and had vanquished the surly old head gardener in more than one battle. She had washed the Charles the Second glass, and the Leeds dessert

dishes, both too sacred to be trusted to meaner hands. She had given out table linen, and preserved fruits, and Parisian sweetmeats. She had brought forth crewel-work cushions, and antimacassars, which were too fresh and elegant for daily wear. And now she sat down to the luncheon, which was always her dinner, looking wan and tired, and inwardly wishing she were in the humblest lodging of her own, rather than amidst the splendours of Aspinall Towers.

'I should ask you to dine with us this evening, my dear,' said Mrs. Aspinall amiably, 'only we shall be six, and that is such a nice number for the oval table in the dining-room. If the table were only round the odd number would make no difference.'

'Dear Mrs. Aspinall, it doesn't matter,' Louisa answered with a feeble smile, although she would have liked to dine with Lady Frances Grange, for that young lady had been cordial and pleasant to her on the rare occasions when they had met. But she was too familiar with what she called 'Mrs. Aspinall's ways' not to know that this talk about the table was only an excuse. If there had been five she would not have been asked to be the sixth. If there had been nine she would not have been wanted to be the tenth. Her only chance of a place at the banquet was when a party of fifteen or sixteen had unluckily dwindled to thirteen, and then Mrs. Aspinall insisted on having Pawker, lest any superstitious guest should feel uncomfortable.

'You must come and take your tea with us, of course,' said her patroness.

'I shall be very pleased. Lady Frances is so pretty.'

'Pretty! An olive-skinned thing, and as thin as a whipping post. Dulcibella Courtenay is pretty, if you like. That is real beauty.'

'Lady Frances has such a distinguished air.'

'Naturally. Blue blood will show itself somehow,' answered Mrs. Aspinall, in a tone which implied that her blood was of the deepest indigo.

She spent the afternoon in making a round of visits. Royalty of her kind required to be maintained by frequent progresses among her people. She never suffered herself to be forgotten. She was indefatigable in making calls, and she had a bi-monthly afternoon, the first and third Saturday in the month, to which she insisted upon people coming. There were only tea and cakes and gossip, and occasionally a little feeble music, but Mrs. Aspinall's pale amber settees were generally crowded.

At half-past seven Mrs. Aspinall was in her drawing-room, looking her handsomest. She was a fine-looking woman, of what is generally considered the aristocratic type, nose arched and knobby, nostrils large, eyes a cold gray, eyebrows a work of art; hair the Titian red, fluffy in texture, covering her high, narrow

forehead with stray locks and tendrils which effectually veiled the wrinkles of seven and forty ; teeth good and real ; lips thin and a trifle acid in expression, but of a vivid rose which would have been exceptional in a girl of seventeen, and was startling in a waning beauty.

To-night Mrs. Aspinall wore a myrtle green velvet gown, with no adornment save drooping ruffles of old Mechlin lace, and an antique Venetian chatelaine of dull gold.

She walked slowly up and down the long drawing-room, musing upon her expected guests—or rather upon one of them, for it was of one only whom she thought.

'Why should he not marry?' she asked herself. 'His daughter will be married before long, and then he will find that house of his horribly dull. He will either marry, or go off to the Continent and wander half over Europe, as he did after his wife's death. It would be far more sensible to marry—if he made a wise choice—and I think he is too clever a man to choose some frivolous girl, who would think she did him a favour by accepting him, and would compensate herself by making his life miserable.'

The drawing-room at Aspinall Manor was spacious and lofty ; but it had none of that cheery homeliness which made the Tangley Manor drawing-room so pleasant. It was a pallid, cold-looking apartment, the walls white and gold, with large oval mirrors at intervals, and old crystal girandoles. The draperies and chair and sofa coverings were of amber satin, which time had robbed of its original brightness and warmth of tone. The Aubusson carpet was of faded drab, and blue, and cream, and gold, all blending into one pale, subdued tint. The long, straight windows, with their long, straight curtains, accentuated the loftiness of the room. There were broad amber settees against the walls, spindle-legged chairs of the genuine Louis Seize period, in gold and amber, two or three spindle-legged tables, round and oval, decorated with masks, goats' heads and festoons, a pair of buhl jardinières filled with ferns and flowers, and all the rest of the room was empty space. It was a room especially adapted for stately receptions and large assemblies, and it was well for Mrs. Aspinall that she had a snug and cosy retreat from all this barren grandeur in the small ante-room through which her saloon was approached. Here, within walls whose tawny leather covering gave a look of warmth, there were low modern chairs of the puff species, gipsy tables, books, newspapers, and all the comforts of every-day life.

'Sir Everard Courtenay, Miss Courtenay, Mr. Blake,' announced Browse, the butler.

Mrs. Aspinall received Sir Everard and his daughter with enthusiasm—it was so good, so kind, so nice of Dulcie and her

father to come in this truly friendly way. To Morton she gave two fingers and a smiling nod. He was nothing to her. She had no daughters to marry, and a rich young *parvenu* more or less in the world could make no difference to her. But she had her views about Sir Everard—had cherished those views for a long time, and had striven in vain for the opportunity of carrying them to a successful issue. Now that Dulcie was going to be married it seemed to her that the opportunity had come.

She was glad when, after a little trivial talk about the weather, Dulcie and Morton strayed through the curtained archway into the ante-room, with that curious knack of getting away from other people peculiar to engaged lovers.

Mrs. Aspinall and Sir Everard were in front of the fireplace, she standing in her favourite attitude, with her foot on the low, brass fender, and the edge of her velvet gown drawn up a little, to show the rich lace upon her petticoat. She had a long, narrow foot and high instep—unmistakable mark of that blue blood on which she prided herself.

'When is it to be, Sir Everard?' she asked, looking down at her green satin slipper.

'When is what to be?'

'Dulcie's marriage.'

Sir Everard gave a little start, as if it were a most unexpected question.

'Her marriage! Not for a long time, I hope. She and Morton are engaged, but there has been no talk of fixing the time for their wedding. She is so young.'

'Twenty,' said Mrs. Aspinall, with an insinuating air. 'I was married at seventeen.'

She emphasized this with a sigh, as if that early marriage had not been altogether happy, as if there were still an empty chamber in her heart waiting for an eligible tenant.

'A great deal too soon,' said Sir Everard, with a provokingly matter-of-fact tone.

'It was my father's doing. I had no voice in the matter.'

'I hope Dulcie will be in no hurry,' said Sir Everard, not showing the faintest retrospective interest in Mrs. Aspinall's marriage. 'I shall be wretched without her.'

'You will miss her very much, no doubt, but it is a loss you must have anticipated. And, altogether charming as she is, at her age Dulcie can be no companion for you.'

'Not a companion for me!' cried Sir Everard. 'She is my second self—my source of perpetual delight. She understands my every thought and feeling; she appreciates my favourite books as thoroughly as the subtlest of professional critics could do; she cheers me when I am dull; she soothes me when I am weary. Where should I find such another companion? No, Mrs.

Aspinall, I am too old to make new friendships. When Dulcie leaves me my life will be desolate.'

Mrs. Aspinall's thin lips tightened a little, and her calculating gray eyes assumed a troubled look, but only for a few moments, and then she was able to smile her sweetest smile at the affectionate father.

'Nothing in nature can be more beautiful than such an attachment,' she said. 'But for your own sake, dear Sir Everard, I trust that new friendships—new ties—'

'There can be none. New ties—impossible. I have but a remnant of life to live, and that must be spent with no better companions than my books.'

'A remnant of life; you are so young.'

'Fifty next January, Mrs. Aspinall; and I feel as if I had lived a century. But I did not come here to be gloomy. Dulcie and I will not be entirely parted, even when she is Mrs. Blake. I shall see her often, and in years to come her children will console me for the loss of their mother. I must submit to the common fate.'

'Lord Beville, Lady Frances Grange,' announced Browse.

Their entrance made an agreeable diversion. Lady Frances, called by her intimates Lady Fanny, and even Fan, was one of the liveliest young women in the county; a magnificent horsewoman, a charming singer, and with about as much education, outside those two accomplishments, as the average ballet-girl. She, like Dulcie, was motherless, and had been allowed to have her own way ever since she could remember, and had governed her good old governess, and reigned supreme in a slip-shod household. But she had not made such good use of her liberty as Dulcie had done. She was not given to books, save of the lightest and most amusing order. She had just learnt enough English to write a decent letter, and enough French to sing a ballad in that language, and to understand and pronounce those phrases which crop up in British conversation. Beyond this, her governess had been a failure.

But despite these shortcomings, Frances Grange was so winning and so sweet, that no one would have wished her other than she was. She was just pretty enough to be intensely fascinating. She had small, delicately-cut features, a brunette complexion, dark brown hair, worn short and curly like a boy's, so that there were no plaits or tails to tumble over her shoulders or be blown across her eyes in the hunting field. She had a slim and graceful figure, and, though tall among women, was a featherweight on a powerful hunter. She dressed simply and well, without extravagance, talked as much slang as an Oxford undergraduate, and set the strict middle-aged section of society at defiance. Her chief friend was her brother, who resembled her

mentally and morally, but not physically, since he was a tawny-whiskered young athlete, of the true Saxon type, broad-nosed, blue-eyed, ruddy-cheeked. He adored Fanny; Fanny believed in him; and they were altogether a model brother and sister.

The evening was as pleasant as Mrs. Aspinall could have desired. Yet things did not take the exact turn she had intended. Lady Frances contrived to absorb a good deal of Sir Everard's attention, with her lively sallies and rattling description of the day's sport; Dulcie and Morton were happy in their quiet way, sitting together in corners, but were intruded upon more than they cared about by Lord Beville, who insisted upon talking to Dulcie, and was inclined to ignore Mr. Blake's peculiar privileges as an accepted suitor. Mrs. Aspinall felt when all was over that her evening had been a success; but she made up her mind never again to invite Lady Frances to meet Sir Everard Courtenay.

CHAPTER XII.

AT THE 'SUGAR-LOAVES.'

The fields and hedgerows round Austhrope were white with wintry rime, and all the trees were fairy-trees wreathed with hoar-frost. In pleasant contrast to this all-pervading whiteness, the lighted casements of cottages and homesteads shone out cheerily with ruddy fire-glow or yellow candle-light, brightening the arctic landscape, and comforting the wayfarer with the assurance of home and shelter near. The old ugly church, with its bare brick tower and blank rayless windows, alone looked bleak and grim. Everywhere else there was a twinkle of light, the gleam of a fire, blue smoke curling up through the clear night sky, the sense of a homely inhabited world. The brightest spot in the village, the very focus of comfort, and good cheer, and homeliness, and pleasant society, was the 'Three Sugar-Loaves Inn,' a long, low, substantial building, standing bravely out where two roads went off at right angles from the end of the broad village street. The proprietor of the 'Sugar-Loaves' farmed a few acres of fertile pasture, speculated in his small way in store cattle, was an amateur of pigs, fattened turkeys for the Christmas market, and sold butter all the year round; hence had arisen a spaciousness and air of plenty about the inn and its surroundings which the mere traffic in neat wines, beer, and spirits could scarcely have produced. The very look of the house, inside and out, the warm, cosy rooms and sanded passages, the glowing kitchen and cool dairy, the barns, poultry-houses, and pig-sties adjacent, suggested good cheer, and an almost Gargantuan plenty.

Behind the bar was the parlour, a low room with a heavily-

timbered ceiling, a wide fire-place, deeply recessed casement-windows looking into a garden where flowers and vegetables grew in homely propinquity, parsley and pinks, kail and cabbage roses, stocks and radishes jostling one another, in box-edged beds, screened and intersected by espaliers which were supposed to grow the biggest codling apples in the county.

To-night the closely-drawn red moreen curtains shut out the view of the whitened beds, where only an occasional kail sprout perked its green crest above the rimy ground. All within was comfort and warmth—shining brown walls, and shining brown chairs and tables reflecting the crimson gleam of the fire, and the yellow flame of the tall candles in old brass candlesticks. Gas had never invaded Austhorpe, and the landlord of the 'Sugar-Loaves' set his face against paraffin and the whole family of oils. Candles were one of the outward and visible signs of those good old Tory principles which John Rhind of the 'Sugar-Loaves' had inherited from his father and grandfather, together with the brass candlesticks and the freehold of the inn; and he meant to burn candles to his dying day.

John Rhind, as the possessor of his homestead and farm, looked upon himself as one of the landowners of the place. He was inwardly pleased when working men or small boys addressed him as squire. He felt himself a bulwark of Church and State, he patronized Mr. Mawk, the curate, and he looked down upon the schoolmaster. His wife was the best-dressed woman in Austhorpe, after Miss Courtenay, and his daughter played the piano and worked in crewels all day long, like the finest lady in the land.

This parlour at the 'Three Sugar-Loaves' was the village club, and the chosen resort of all the best people in the parish of Austhorpe, and even some other parishes conterminous therewith; for there was no other inn within ten miles which afforded such solid comforts or enjoyed so wide a popularity. Here on this December night were assembled Shafto Jebb, the village doctor; Mr. Gomersall, farmer and churchwarden, of Pear Tree Farm, a cosy old homestead, a mile and a half from Austhorpe; Mr. Upham, better known as Jack Upham, the solicitor, who had his office at Highclere, but who lived in a rustic bow-windowed cottage in Austhorpe Lane; and lastly William Wadd, Morton Blake's bailiff, gamekeeper, and *factotum*.

The trial of Humphrey Vargas was but a week old, and it was still the staple of conversation at the 'Three Sugar-Loaves.' It had been discussed in all its bearings, yet no one had wearied of the subject. There was a strong human interest in it which made the theme agreeable to every mind. There was a difference of opinion, too, among the nightly guests of the parlour, which heightened the interest.

There was a door of communication between the parlour and the bar, a door which was generally left open or ajar, for the convenience of prompt attendance on the part of the landlord, who waited in person on his parlour customers, deeming those convivial gentlemen the mainstay of his trade, and who very often joined in the conviviality, while his wife, a plump, comely personage, plied her needle by the neat little fireplace in the bar, and was pleased to hear her husband get the best of an argument, or put down a political opponent with the high-handed authority of a fine old pig-headed Conservatism.

To-night, just as conversation in the parlour was loudest, Morton Blake, who but rarely was known to cross the threshold of the 'Sugar-Loaves,' opened the front door, and came to the little half-door of the bar.

'Why, Mr.——' began John Rhind, surprised at the apparition, but Morton put his finger on his lips. He pointed significantly to the half-open door of communication, whereupon the landlord quietly closed it.

'May I come in, and sit in your bar for a little while, Rhind?' said Morton.

'Why, of course you can, sir; and welcome you are, too. Your father was never the stranger here that you are. Many a time has he sat in that chair, while he had his hunter's mouth washed out, after a hard day, and has taken his glass of beer as friendly as if he'd been one of the smock-frock farmers hereabouts. Not a bit of pride, sir—the genuine metal—and as fine a looking gentleman as ever wore shoe-leather.'

'I'm glad you liked him, Rhind; I'm always glad to hear him praised.'

'You've never heard anybody speak against him, I'll warrant.'

'No, thank God. He seems never to have made an enemy, in spite of that fellow's insinuations,' pursued Morton thoughtfully, and with a darkening brow.

'Meaning the prisoner's counsel, sir. Lord, don't you take no heed of what he said. They must insinooate some'at. They're paid to do it.'

'I don't want any one to know I'm here, Rhind.'

'All right, sir. I can keep that there door fast, and you can sit there snug till we shuts up, if you like.'

'But I want the door a little way open. I hear from Wadd that there's been a good deal of talk about the trial, and I want to hear what people say about it. They wouldn't talk freely before me, you see, and I can't trust to Wadd's report of their conversation. He muddles everything so. I want to hear with my own ears.'

'That's easy enough, sir,' answered Rhind. 'They was all full of it five minutes ago, when I took in fresh glasses. I'll

just set the door ajar, and you may hear every syllable, and none o' them chaps need be any the wiser.'

'Guilty,' replied Jack Upham, pursuing the argument of the evening, after a replenishing of glasses all round, and a general filling of pipes. The farmer and the bailiff smoked clay churchwardens, the doctor carried a short, black-muzzled meerschaum in the breast pocket of his cut-away coat, the lawyer alone indulged in cigars. 'Guilty,' repeated Mr. Upham, glaring defiance at Shafto Jebb. 'Why, of course the fellow is guilty. Would any man put himself in such a fix who wasn't? A man doesn't put his neck into a noose without reason.'

'Did you never hear of a man losing temper with fortune and hanging himself because life didn't sit easy upon him?' argued the surgeon. 'Did you never hear of suicides? I thought they were common enough. You can hardly take up a newspaper without reading of three or four cases which would have been called *felo de se* fifty years ago. Now-a-days we're more charitable, and call them temporary insanity. Now what I say is that this Vargas gave himself up in a fit of temporary insanity. A poor wretch like that, with a heart no bigger than a shrimp's, hasn't pluck enough to go and buy three penn'orth of rope and put it round his own neck. He'd rather give himself up to a policeman, and get the job done for him. It isn't the first time a man has confessed to a crime he never committed, and I don't suppose it'll be the last; but as sure as I am sitting here in this arm-chair, smoking this pipe, it wasn't Humphrey Vargas who murdered Walter Blake.'

The listener, sitting between the half-open door and the snug little fireplace in the bar, waited with contracted brows and set lips for what was coming next.

'But look here now, Shafto,' remonstrated Joe Gomersall, the churchwarden, who was one of Mr. Jebb's best customers, and therefore had a claim to speak with authority. 'There's no use in launching out with such statements unless you are prepared to tell us what grounds you go upon.'

'That's easily done. First and foremost, the confession made by Humphrey Vargas is a cock-and-bull story. Any fool can see that. If I'd had to defend him I should have made a much stronger point of that than his counsel did.'

'If he'd had Jebb for his counsel of course he'd have got off,' said Upham, with a sneer.

Shafto Jebb was one of those clever men whose self-conscious cleverness offends more than their good-nature pleases.

'Secondly,' continued Jebb, ignoring the interruption,—'and this the prisoner's counsel ought to have found out, for it was known to the police at the time—the man who killed Walter Blake was on horseback.'

'How do you know that?' asked Gomersall.

'By the evidence of the hoof-prints on the road and bank. There was a frost the night after the murder—a light frost—but enough to harden every footmark on the road. I was out with the constable and another man next morning, examining the scene of the murder. Well, gentlemen, Mr. Blake's horse had gone home, there was no doubt as to him. He'd rushed off like a mad thing in his fright, and made a dash right across Blatchmardean Copse; there were the traces of his flight through the brushwood and across the stream, and a bit of his bridle hanging on a low branch, plenty to show the way he took, and that he didn't lose much time about it was proved at the inquest, for a boy found him feeding on Tangley Common at half-past six, ever so long before anybody knew about the murder. But just where Blake was found there were traces of another horse's hoofs as if one horseman had followed the other. Both stopped at the same point; there was nothing to show that the second horseman had gone on to Austhorpe; but on the clay bank, within a few yards of the spot where the murdered man was found, there were traces to show that a horse had been jumped from the road to the bank, and across the hedge into the meadow beyond. It was a blind hedge, with a good deal of greenery about it, and the horse had gone crashing through a thick growth of blackberry bushes and oak saplings. In the field we lost all trace of him, for there were a couple of mares and foals grazing, and the marks on the grass were not distinct enough to show where the print had been made by an iron shoe, or where by the unshod hoof. There was a gate leading out of the field into an accommodation road, the kind of lane that an Irishman calls a boreen, but here the mud was so thick and the ground so broken we could trace nothing. How the horseman doubled and wound, or where he went, I can't say; but it's perfectly clear to me, and it was clear at the time to old Tom Purdy, the constable—but I suppose he's in his dotage now and has forgotten all about it—that there was a horseman with Walter Blake when he was murdered.'

The company were evidently impressed. Mr. Jebb had said a good deal upon previous evenings, but he had never stated his case plainly until now.

'Why didn't you come forward and state this at the trial?' asked Upham.

Shafto Jebb shrugged his shoulders.

'The man had counsel to defend him,' he said. 'I supposed that his counsel would have heard all that I could tell him.'

'You ought to make it known even now,' said Gomersall.

'I have thought of penning a letter to the *Times*,' replied Jebb, 'but I think it's hardly worth while. I have signed a

memorial to the Home Secretary, and I don't think the poor devil will be hanged.'

Morton Blake started at this, and half rose from his seat.

'Oh, there's a memorial, is there?' inquired the farmer.

'Yes, the big-wigs have started it; Sir Nathaniel Ritherdon, Lord Blatchmardean, and Sir Everard Courtenay, and the rest of them. There'll be a commutation of the sentence, depend upon it—penal servitude for life—and as the fellow no doubt appropriated the dead man's watch and purse, he will get no more than he deserves, if he finishes his career at Portland.'

'I don't think Mr. Tomplin would have made much out of your hoof-prints, Jebb, if he had been ever so well posted,' said Upham, the attorney, with a critical air. 'On a day when thirty or forty men were out hunting, a jump more or less would count for very little.'

'But the hounds didn't run that way.'

'No, but some fellow trying a short cut, you know——'

'Nonsense, man, the hunt was never within three miles of the spot. It wasn't the jump that was extraordinary, but the fact that the two horsemen rode to that spot together, that Blake was murdered on the spot, and that the second horseman, whoever he was, rode off across country from that spot.'

'How can any one tell that the two horsemen were together? persisted the lawyer. 'The footprints may have been made at separate times, and the fact of the horseman jumping the bank at that point may have been a simple coincidence; some farmer making a short cut home after the hunt.'

'I asked all the fellows who live out that way, and could hear of no one who had ridden across that field,' answered Jebb.

Jack Upham made very light of Mr. Jebb's piece of evidence. The two men always disagreed with each other upon principle. Each had a great idea of his own cleverness, and each thought the other wanted putting down. They were both members of Austhorpe Vestry, a narrow-minded village oligarchy, which believed itself to hold as distinct a place in history as the Council of Ten.

'And that's your only ground for believing Vargas innocent?' said Upham sneeringly.

'I don't say it's my only reason. It's one of my reasons.'

'Let us hear a few of the others.'

'Not to-night. I've no brief to defend Mr. Vargas, and I don't feel myself called upon to make any further statement of my reasons for believing him innocent. If a man of that stamp chooses to put a rope round his neck it isn't my business to take it off.'

'I vote we change the conversation,' suggested Gomersall, who foresaw the danger of a wordy war between the lawyer and

the doctor. 'We've talked a precious deal too much about this Vargas. He's not an interesting character, and he isn't worth it. How are you off for pheasants this year, Wadd?' demanded the farmer, turning to Mr. Blake's *factotum*, a stolid personage who enjoyed society, but rarely spoke unless he was spoken to.

'Pretty well, thank you, furmer, but we should be just as well off if we hadn't any, except for Mrs. Cook. Mr. Blake don't take the interest in the covers as his father did. He don't care about breedin', and he ain't hot upon shootin'. He just takes up his gun in what I call a namatoorist sort of a way—dilly-taunty-like—and he's a fairish shot, I allow, but with none of the sperrit as his father had when he got in a warm corner, pepperin' away at the burds like mad. And he don't have the right sort of people at his place, neither,—none o' them wild blades that used to keep us all on the move and never went to bed at night till it was time to get up in the mornin'.'

'Times have changed, Wadd,' said the lawyer.

'So they have, Mr. Upham, but they ain't changed for the better. Harvests is bad, and beasts is dear, and a good bit of horse-flesh ain't to be had; and this here country is criss-crossed with railways to that degree that you can't go for a quiet ride without finding your horses shying away from a locomotive, or start a fox so that you mayn't have to chop him up in a tunnel. There's no improvement in anything except guns, and I like the old-fashioned sort best.'

'Well, gentlemen, the best of friends must part,' said Jebb, as he refilled his pipe for the homeward walk. 'My missus will be wanting her bit of supper, and she never sits down till I get home. Are you ready, Joe? We may as well walk together.'

Mr. Gomersall rose at his friend's bidding, and this was the signal for a general break-up. The dark-faced, dark-whiskered Upham, renowned for his cleverness as a lawyer, but rather respected than liked, departed alone. Wadd rolled off towards Tangley, whistling as he went: while Gomersall and the doctor strode along the broad highway, with its frozen pond, and darkened schoolhouse, and low-roofed cottages wrapped in night and silence.

'Well, sir, you heerd 'em plain enough, didn't you?' asked the landlord cheerily, when the guests had made their departure, with loud leave-takings.

'Yes, I heard them.'

'But there ain't much in it when all's heerd, be there, Mr. Blake? A power o' talk, but it don't come to a pint.'

'I've heard enough to make me feel uncomfortable,' said Morton.

'Lord, now, Mr. Blake, don't say that. You didn't ought to give heed to a long-tongued fellow like Jebb, a man that must

be talking. What business had he prying and spying about with the constable on the morning arter the murder? It weren't a medical case—it weren't his trade—but there's never a pie baked in Austhorpe that he musn't have a finger in it. Don't you worry your mind, sir. The case is as plain as the nose on your face. The man who gave hisself up for the murder is the man who did it, and anybody that says he ain't must be a rank fool.'

Morton did not stop to argue the point. He took up his hat, thanked the landlord for his civility, wished Mr. Rhind good-night, and went away without another word.

'A fine, handsome-looking young man, and civil spoken,' said John Rhind, 'but not a patch upon his father.'

CHAPTER XIII.

A PLEA FOR THE PRISONER.

Morton Blake sat alone in his study on the day after his evening visit to the 'Three Sugar-Loaves,' trying to bring his mind to bear upon the pages of a Parliamentary report, but finding his thoughts inclined to wander to last night's conversation in the inn parlour, and to vain speculations upon what he had heard. Wadd, the bailiff, had been right in his assertion that Morton was altogether different from his father. Walter Blake had been of an easier temper, pleasure-loving, fond of society, an ardent sportsman, with no aspiration beyond the enjoyment of the present hour; a man of warm feelings, quick impulses, winning manners; a man who could make himself popular in every society, and who had been admired and beloved in his own particular set. Beyond pleasing himself and giving such pleasure as he could to other people, without over-much trouble to himself, by open-handed, careless benevolence, and a sympathetic nature, Morton's father had never aspired. He had taken life and all its responsibilities lightly, and had considered this world a place in which his chief mission was to be happy. Before he was twenty-one he had plighted himself, in his usual impulsive manner, to Horatia Martin, the handsomest girl in the district, and before he was twenty-two, and had been six months married, he found that he had made one of those mistakes which with some men give an uncomfortable twist to a whole lifetime. But Walter Blake, having found out his mistake, made the best of it. He was an admirable husband, but he was very seldom at home between breakfast and dinner. During dinner he made pretty speeches to his wife, who looked superb in evening dress, and did the honours of his house admirably. After dinner the master of the house was generally to be found with his masculine guests

in the billiard-room and the smoking-room. It will be seen, therefore, that Mrs. Blake did not get much of her husband's society.

Bondage thus lightly worn hardly galled even Walter Blake's self-indulgent nature, and not even his most intimate friend discovered how little he cared for his wife.

Morton was of a different temper, and for him life had another and more serious meaning. He inherited from his grandfather, Geoffrey Blake, something of that dogged and persevering spirit which had helped the penniless boy to fortune—something of the temper of those good old Puritan ancestors whose spotless repute in a lowly walk of life had been Geoffrey's proudest boast. Morton was ambitious. He was a strong politician. He hoped to sit in Parliament before long. He had thought deeply upon the most stirring questions of the time. He was as strong a Liberal as his grandfather had been, and he had an intense sympathy with the lower classes, and a fiery indignation against all oppressive legislation. He had read much, and thought much, and was thoroughly posted in all those subjects which enable a man to converse on equal terms with the best men of his age.

All his plans had been unsettled and thrown into abeyance by the events of the last six weeks. Every faculty of his mind had been concentrated upon one work and one subject. And even now, though he tried to persuade himself that all was over, that his father's cruel death was soon to be bloodily avenged, and that there was no further duty left for the son to perform, still his mind was unsatisfied, there were lingering doubts unsolved, and he sought in vain for rest, and the power to resume his old studies with something of the old interest that had hitherto made them pleasant to him.

He closed the bulky volume, in which he had been reading a long debate upon the Poor Laws, with an impatient sigh.

'It is no use,' he said to himself, getting up and beginning to pace the room, as he always did when his mind was troubled. 'I sit staring at the page while my thoughts are far away. What did that man mean by his hints and half-expressed suggestions in his cross-examination of Sir Everard? A social mystery? What mystery? And how could it concern Sir Everard? Why did the counsel suggest that there might have been a break in the friendship of Sir Everard and my father? Why did he ask if there had been any trouble about Lady Courtenay? No one ever hinted at such trouble or at any estrangement. What can have suggested such an idea to this scoundrel's advocate? I should like to see this Mr. Tomplin and have the matter out with him. A man has no right to drop hints of this kind if he has no ground for them.'

After walking slowly up and down the room for some time he came to a standstill before the large square window looking across the lawn and shrubbery to Tangley Common, and stood there watching the gardener sweeping the whitened paths, and shovelling the fallen leaves into his barrow, in an absent-minded way, like a man who has given himself up to absolute idleness of mind and body. But his thoughts were busy all the while, brooding upon points in the evidence at the trial, or upon the story he had heard last night.

'Who among all the men who were out hunting that day could have had a quarrel with my father, or any motive for murdering him?' he asked himself. 'I must try back. I must question those who knew his life at that time. Aunt Dora, for instance. She lived with him for the last three years of his life, and they were devoted to each other. She must know everything. It isn't possible that he could have made an enemy without her knowledge. People who knew him have told me that he was the most open-hearted of men.'

He looked across the lawn at a figure that had just entered the gate, a figure that was strange to him. It was a youngish woman, neatly clad, with the air of a respectable servant, or small tradesman's wife. She was dressed in black, and as she passed in front of the study window on her way to the hall door, Morton saw that her pale face had a distressed and anxious expression.

Presently he heard voices in the hall, a woman's voice pleading, the authoritative tones of the butler answering. He opened his door and looked out.

'I can only state my business to Mr. Blake himself,' said the woman, looking piteously in at the door, which the butler guarded with his bulky person, 'and he would not know my name. Please say that a person in great trouble begs to see him.'

'Let her in, Andrew,' said Morton, and then turning to the woman, who entered eagerly, he said, 'Come into my study, please, and tell me your business as briefly as you can. But if it is a case of distress, would it not be better for you to see my aunt, Miss Blake? She is relieving officer to all the parish, and will be more ready to sympathize with you than I can be.'

'No, sir. I'd rather talk to you, please. This is a matter that concerns you.'

'Indeed,' said Morton, surprised.

She was a nice-looking woman, of about two or three-and-thirty, with an intelligent face, bright gray eyes, and a resolute mouth—a woman who looked as if she could make her way through the world unaided, and would trouble no one with her needs or her sorrows. She had an honest, outspoken air which Morton liked.

'My name is Jane Barnard, sir,' said she. 'I am the eldest daughter of the miserable man who is to be hanged to-morrow week at Highclere.'

Morton's face grew black as thunder.

'Then I can have nothing to say to you!' he exclaimed harshly: 'and I wonder at your audacity in coming here.'

'Oh, sir, don't say that,' pleaded the woman; 'don't harden your heart against me at the first, sir. If I didn't know that my father is innocent of that fearful crime I would never have crossed your threshold.'

'The crime was brought home to him,' said Morton.

'The robbery, sir, but not the murder. My father has done many evil things, but he was never a shedder of blood. Oh, sir, I saw him yesterday for the first time since I was eleven years old—a poor, feeble, broken-down creature—yet with something in his poor, pinched old face that brought back the time when I was a child, and used to clamber on his knees. He swore to me that he never did that dreadful deed. He took the money from the poor dead corpse, but he never harmed your father.'

'It is worse than folly to come to me with such a story as this. The man is condemned out of his own mouth. Why should he take upon himself a crime he had not committed? If he wanted the shelter of a jail he would have confessed to the robbery only—supposing he were guiltless of the murder.'

'He was desperate, sir, miserable and downtrodden, a mere worm for every one to kick out of their path. He was old and weak, and he hadn't the pluck to take a rope and hang himself, and he knew if he gave himself over to the law an end would be made of him somehow. He didn't feel that he cared whether he was hanged or not. His life was a burden to him, and he wanted to get rid of it. That is what he tried to make me understand yesterday.'

'Well, he has got his wish,' said Morton gloomily. 'He will be hanged next week.'

'Oh, please God not, sir. Surely people will lift up their voices to save such a feeble, wretched creature from a ghastly death. His heart fails him now that he sees himself face to face with death, and he prays that the poor remnant of his life may be spared, although he may have to spend his last days in prison. And he bade me tell you, sir, that he begs your pardon humbly for having made a false statement about the murder. He thinks the devil must have driven him to tell those wicked lies which he told to Sir Everard Courtenay, and he prays you to help him if you can. And oh, sir, I entreat you to sign the memorial to the Home Secretary, and to do all you can to get the sentence commuted.'

'What! I am to intercede for the life of my father's mur-

derer? When, after an interval of twenty years, justice is about to be done, I am to thrust myself in the way to prevent the carrying out of the sentence!'

'I tell you, sir, my father is innocent of that crime.'

'You tell me that he tells you so, and I answer that I don't believe him. Every murderer makes the same assertion; boldly, doggedly, asseverates his innocence; till he is at the foot of the scaffold and the game is lost, and then he coolly admits his guilt. Your father, after playing the braggadocio, and giving himself up in a heroic fashion, turns coward at the last and recants. He is not the less a murderer because he is afraid of the gallows. I will not sign the memorial, and I shall consider any person who does sign it as something less than my friend.'

'Sir Everard Courtenay has signed it, sir. Indeed, I believe Sir Everard and Sir Nathaniel Ritherdon, the sheriff, were the gentlemen who started it.'

'I am deeply offended with Sir Everard for his part in the matter. And now I must beg to conclude this interview. It is painful to me, and must be painful to you.'

'I am not to be put aside, sir, because of a little pain. I have come all the way from America to help my father, and, God helping me, I will not leave a stone unturned in my effort to save him.'

'You have come from America on purpose, have you? Why, the man, by his own account, is a worthless vagabond, who deserted his children and left them to rot in the workhouse.'

'He is our father, sir—our own flesh and blood—and when we were little children, and lived on this estate, he was good and kind to us. I know that he was the worse for drink sometimes, even then, and that poor mother used to be sorrowful and downhearted about him, but he was fond of us all, and kind to us. It was only after your father turned us out of our home, and my mother died, that he went wrong altogether, and left us to be taken care of by the parish. He is my father, sir, with all his faults, and I mean to do my duty to him; and there's more than that for me to consider, sir. I have a good husband, and four dear children, in America, and I want to clear my father of this dreadful crime for their sakes. I don't want any one to be able to say that my father was hanged for murder, that my children have a murderer's blood in their veins. That would break my heart. My husband is a good, hardworking man, who has toiled to win a respectable place in the world—and he has won it, sir. He has a dry-goods store in Boston, and is looked up to as an honest tradesman; and we have as good a home, sir, as any woman need wish for, though I was only a servant girl when I went out to America, and though after poor mother's death I was brought up in Highclere Union till I was fourteen years

old, when they got me a nursemaid's place at a small shopkeeper's in the town. And my brothers were apprenticed ; and we've all done pretty well—some at home, some abroad—thanks be to God.'

'How did you come to know of your father's situation ?'

'One of my brothers sent me a newspaper, sir. I made up my mind to come home at once, and see my unhappy father. I didn't believe he did it, even though he was his own accuser. My husband could not come with me without injuring his business, for he's not in a large way, and he has to work hard in the store himself, and he's liked, and looked up to. But he gave me all the money I wanted, and he'll send me more, as I want it. I hoped to have been here before the trial, but the steamer only reached Liverpool the day before yesterday.'

There was a pause before Morton made any reply. He was standing by the window, looking out towards the common, as he looked before, but seeing nothing. His brows were bent with a resolute expression, which gave little hope of any softening in his feelings towards the prisoner in Highclere gaol. The woman stood a few paces from him, with clasped hands, watching his face piteously !

'I am very sorry for you, and I respect your purpose,' he said, 'but you cannot expect me to help you. Not until you can bring before me evidence to prove that another man was my father's murderer can I bring myself to believe in your father's innocence. He has accused himself ; and he must take the consequences of his own act.'

'Oh, sir, you are pitiless ! How can I produce new evidence within a week—I, a friendless woman in a country that is almost strange to me after eighteen years' absence ? Where and how am I to find the real murderer ? But I know my father is innocent. He never did a cruel act in his life ; he was never cruel to poor dumb things that came in his way. He loved his dog as it had been his child. He might be weak and easily led away, but never hard or cruel. He could not have beaten a man's brains out on the highway for the sake of a few pounds. I came to you, Mr. Blake, thinking that you would help me ; that you who suffered the loss of your father years ago, by a violent end, would feel for my grief to-day. I did not think it would be any satisfaction to you to have an innocent man hanged.'

'Prove his innocence if you can,' said Morton.

'I'll try,' she answered, and so left him, with a look that was almost sublime.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE YELLOW RIBBON.

TEARS were streaming down Jane Barnard's cheeks as she shut the door of Morton Blake's study, and turned to leave the house in which she had found so little comfort. Just at that moment Dora Blake came out of a room on the opposite side of the hall, and seeing the stranger's tearful face, went over to her and laid a gentle hand upon her shoulder.

'You are in trouble,' she said softly. 'Can I do anything to help you?'

The sweet, low voice, the grave, dark eyes, so full of pity, melted Jane Barnard's heart.

'Oh, madam,' she said, 'I am sure you are good and kind. If you are the Miss Blake I knew when I was a little girl, I know you are full of pity for poor folks. Yes, I am in great trouble, and I came to this house to find help, but I have found none.'

'Come to my room,' said Aunt Dora, opening a door at the back of the hall, and taking the stranger into her snug retreat, where she gave her a chair by the fire, and took the opposite chair for herself.

'You say I knew you when you were a child; you are a native of this parish then, I conclude?'

'Yes, madam, I was born close by, and we lived on your brother's estate when I was a child. You used to come in to see my poor mother sometimes, and sit beside our fire and chat with her just as if you were friends and equals; not like some of the district ladies that go into poor folks' cottages at meal-time and grumble at what they see on the table, and sit down and read the Bible to a working man at his dinner without asking by your leave, or with your leave. I've heard mother say your visits were like sunshine, Miss Blake.'

'What was your mother's name?'

'Vargas.'

'The name of the man who murdered my brother.'

'The man who is in gaol, and who is to die for that crime if nobody interferes to save him; but not the man who did it. No, dear lady, if I did not know and feel, as surely as I know and feel that there is a sun in the sky, that my father is innocent of that cruel murder, I would never have crossed this threshold to-day. I would not dare to look you in the face. I would crawl out of your presence like a beaten dog.'

'How can we believe a man innocent of a crime which he has confessed, which the strongest evidence has brought home to him?'

Jane Barnard pleaded her father's cause with Miss Blake as she had pleaded with Morton, and Aunt Dora listened with grave attention to every word the woman said. She was asked to believe a thing which seemed on the face of it incredible. She was asked to re-open a question which she thought at rest for ever. It had been an infinite relief to her to see the mystery of her brother's death finally solved, as she thought, although her tender heart pitied the forlorn wretch who was to suffer for the crime.

'How can I help you?' she asked at last.

'You can help me in two ways, dear Miss Blake. First by signing the memorial which Sir Nathaniel Ritherdon and Sir Everard Courtenay have put in hand.'

'Sir Everard Courtenay!' exclaimed Dora Blake. 'What, is he trying to save your father?'

'He has signed the memorial. If you will sign it and induce your friends to sign it, the sentence may be commuted, my father's life may be spared. You can help me still further, still better, by aiding me with your memory of years gone by to the discovery of the real murderer.'

Miss Blake started.

'You are mad to think of such a thing,' she said. 'If your father is not the murderer, who is to find the real criminal—who is to unravel a mystery which baffled the police when the crime was newly done, and evidence could more easily be had?'

'A resolute mind and an earnest purpose may do much, Miss Blake. I want to clear my father's name for the sake of my husband and my children. James Barnard was better placed in the world than I was when he married me. He was the son of respectable parents, well educated, in business for himself, and I was only a domestic servant. He stooped low enough when he chose me for his wife, but I don't want him to be told that he married a woman whose father was hanged for murder. I have come across the sea to save my father's life, and to clear his name, if it is to be done by a woman's work, and I think I'd rather die than go back to Boston without having done it.'

'I will sign the memorial, and induce others to sign it if I can,' said Miss Blake, after a silence of some moments. 'So far I am willing to help you; for it would be no comfort to me, in my life-long regret for my dear brother, to know that the man who killed him had died a shameful death. As for helping you to any discovery that could prove your father's innocence of the murder—there I can do nothing.'

'Are you sure of that, Miss Blake? Yet you must know many circumstances connected with your brother's death which are dark to me. If my father's story is true, and I firmly believe it, the man who killed Mr. Blake had but one motive, and that

was to take his life. Surely you must know if your brother had an enemy vindictive enough to make such a crime possible?'

'He had no such enemy,' said Dora Blake quickly, and then her eye grew troubled, and she glanced involuntarily towards the escritoire from which she had taken the packet of old letters on the night of Vargas's confession.

'He had no enemies,' she repeated; 'he was the kindest and most generous of men. He was not faultless—we are none of us free from the taint of sin, we all need pardon—but he was kind, and frank, and open-handed.'

'Miss Blake, you are a good woman, but I know you are keeping something from me,' said Mrs. Barnard, with an outspoken bluntness which savoured of her adopted country.

'You have no right to say such a thing,' faltered Dora.

'Have I not a right to say what I mean? We always do in America. I don't want to offend you, Miss Blake, for I have a grateful remembrance of your goodness to my poor mother, even though your brother's harshness was the cause of her death.'

'My brother acted as any other landowner would have done under the circumstances. He turned your father off his estate for an offence that had been repeated so often that even his indulgent temper was provoked to punish it. He could have no fore-knowledge of the fatal effect upon your mother's health that was to follow her leaving the cottage. If she had come to me in her trouble I might have been able to help her.'

'But you won't help me in my trouble by speaking your mind freely,' said Mrs. Barnard, with her shrewd gray eyes fixed on Dora Blake's pained face.

'I have said all that can be said. I will do all that can be done about the memorial. You must be content with the only aid I can give you.'

'So be it, Miss Blake. I am grateful for your kindness, even though you might have done more,' answered Jane Barnard, rising and taking a card from a little leather bag that hung on her arm. 'This is my husband's business card, and my address in England is on the back. I have taken a lodging at Highclere—just one bedroom on a second floor, over a tobacconist's shop, for I want to save all my money for the work I have to do. If you should have anything to tell me, please write to me at that address.'

'I will be sure to do so. Believe me, I am deeply sorry for you.'

'I am sure of that, Miss Blake. Good-day.'

Mrs. Barnard curtesied, and left the room as Aunt Dora rang the bell for the servant to see her out.

When she was gone, Dora Blake sat by the fire for some time, lost in thought. Then she took her knitting out of a hanging

pocket by the fire-place—a dainty thing of satin and point lace, made by Elizabeth's deft fingers—and began to knit. The needles flashed swiftly for a little while, and then Aunt Dora threw the work aside with an impatient sigh.

'If this man should be innocent,' she said to herself, 'and there should be any meaning in my old fear—God forbid! God forbid! The thought has haunted me through all these years; and now, just when I believed it was laid at rest for ever, this woman's persistence calls up the old phantom—revives the old doubt.'

She unlocked the escritoire, opened the secret drawer, and took out the packet of letters tied with yellow ribbon.

Again she sat with the letters loose in her lap, looking them over as she had done that October night. She looked at the date of each letter till she came to the particular one she wanted, and then unfolded the paper with tremulous hands, and read lines that were already familiar.

It was the shortest of all the letters, written in a hand that indicated haste and agitation in the writer. The date was Octobe the nineteenth. No year; no address.

'He knows everything. Your letter of last night fell into his hands. I will tell you how, when we meet, though that matters very little. Oh, Walter, his anger was too terrible for words to describe. He was not loud or violent, but his passion withered and blighted me. He knows now, what he has long suspected that I never loved him, that I loved you first, last, always, and shall love you to my dying day. He laughed me to scorn when I told him that we were not the guilty creatures he might think us.' "You are guilty of having lied to me from first to last," he said, "false wife, false friend. Would the measure of your guilt be fuller if you were"—and then came words I cannot write, and I think I must have fainted, for I remember nothing more till I found Lucy hanging over me with smelling salts and hartshorn, and the rain and wind blowing in across my face from the open window.

'You had better hunt to-morrow as you intended. Perhaps he will write to you. Perhaps he may try to see you. Oh, my dearest, be patient, be forbearing for my sake. Tell him that our only sin against him is that we loved each other before ever I saw his face, and have gone on loving each other ever since. Even in the midst of his anger, when his words were most cruel, I was sorry for him. Oh, Walter, can there be a greater crime than such a marriage as mine? What folly, what weakness, what wickedness is worse than that of a woman who lets herself be sold into loveless bondage! Yet my father and mother think themselves good and virtuous, and that they have done their dutv to me. My broken heart cries out against such duty

to-day. I dare not write more. My only chance of getting this letter conveyed to you is to send it by Lucy this instant. She is very good to me, and I think she is true. Yours in life and death.'

There was no signature. Dora Blake was still sitting with this letter in her hand, her eyes filling with tears as she read, when she started at the sound of a gay, light-hearted voice in the hall—a girlish voice talking bright, girlish talk.

She replaced the letters in the escritoire with hurried, nervous hands, not stopping to tie the ribbon round them, or to put them back in the secret drawer, but throwing them in anyhow, and hastily locking the escritoire. She had but just turned the key when the door of her room was thrown open and her niece Clementine came in, followed by Dulcie in her fur jacket and hat.

'Dear Aunt Dora, I thought I was never going to see you again,' said Dulcie, kissing Miss Blake on both cheeks, 'so I ordered the pony carriage an hour after breakfast, and came over to ask what had become of you all.'

'We have been so agitated, so anxious,' faltered Dora Blake, 'about this dreadful trial.'

'Yes, naturally, poor darlings! But now that it's all over, and that the miserable wretch is going to be hanged—though I can't help hoping he won't be—surely we are all going to be happy again.'

'I hope so, Dulcie.'

'As to Morton, I have hardly known him since this terrible business began. I don't think he has given me a thought. If I had been his wife he could scarcely have shown me less attention: and it isn't fair that he should anticipate the indifference of matrimony, is it, auntie?'

Dulcie had adopted Miss Blake as an aunt at the very beginning of her engagement, and made a strong point of her claims as a niece.

'No, my pet. It is not fair,' answered Dora, smiling at the bright face and pouting lips, yet with a pained feeling at her heart all the time, and grave doubt as to whether happiness were as near and as certain as Dulcie fancied.

'Morton has made himself intensely disagreeable for the last six weeks, and now the trial is over he doesn't seem much better,' protested Tiny. 'He was hideously grumpy all breakfast time. He hadn't a word to throw at a dog.'

'Oh, what a pretty ribbon!' cried Dulcie, suddenly descrying something on the floor. 'What a funny old-fashioned colour!'

It was a yellow ribbon that had been tied round the packet of letters, which Miss Blake had dropped in her confusion just now. Dulcie was on her knees upon the Persian rug, with the ribbon in her hand.

'Where did it come from?' she asked; 'it looks half a century old. It reminds me of Miss Austen's novels, and the days when Bath was the centre of fashion, and when girls danced at the Assembly Rooms in white muslin frocks and coral necklaces.'

'It is an old ribbon that I found years ago,' answered Miss Blake. 'I used it to tie up some papers.'

'Such a ribbon ought never to have tied up anything less romantic than love letters, auntie,' said Dulcie, twisting the yellow satin round her fingers, and admiring its smooth texture. 'People don't manufacture such satin as this now-a-days. They are not honest enough. Dear old relic of a departed age, when girls played the harpsichord and danced country dances! I hope you did not use it to tie up butchers' bills. You are so terribly business-like sometimes.'

'Tell us about the dinner at Mother Aspinall's,' asked Tiny, who was appallingly disrespectful to her pastors and masters, and all people to whom she was called upon to do homage. 'Was it good fun?'

'Tiny, how can you speak of her like that?' remonstrated Aunt Dora.

'You don't approve of my calling her mother? But why not? Surely it's a venerable title, generally considered almost a sacred name. If she were the superior of a convent she would be called Reverend Mother. Do tell us about the dinner. She is always asking Morton, and hardly ever asks us, which I call insulting. But no doubt she considers three women out of one family too great a trial; so she fobs us off with her annual garden party, and allows us to struggle in a crowd of nobodies for cold tea and warm ices. Was it fun, Dulcie?'

'It was rather nice,' answered Dulcie, dimpling with sudden smiles. 'Morton was there, you know, and Lord Beville, and I am afraid he was rather more attentive to me than Morton quite liked. He would talk, don't you know, and he didn't seem to understand that Morton and I had any right to shut him out of our conversation. As for Mrs. Aspinall, she was intensely kind—so very effusive to me that she really put the oddest ideas into my mind.'

'What do you call odd ideas?'

'I could not help thinking that she was rather anxious to fascinate papa, and that she would not at all object to be my stepmother.'

Tiny burst into a ringing laugh.

'Not object, indeed! Why, she would give her eyes, or at any rate her eyebrows—she could easily buy another pair—for such a chance. Artful old party! But you are not afraid of your pater being caught by her elderly wiles, are you, Dulcie?

After having been twenty years a widower he is not very likely to marry again.'

'Oh, no,' answered Dulcie, with a happy smile, 'I have no fear of that. I sent the ponies round to the stables, auntie, for I thought perhaps you would not mind having me to lunch.'

'Mind having you!' echoed Miss Blake, taking the girl in her arms and kissing her tenderly, 'my darling, your presence is like sunshine in the house. Mind having you, my pet! God grant that many of our future days may be spent together.'

This was said with deep feeling, with an unusual earnestness, which impressed Dulcie. It was almost as if there was some foreboding of evil in Dora Blake's mind as she breathed this prayer.

'What does that horrid brother of mine mean by shutting himself up in his study all the morning?' exclaimed Tiny. 'He must have heard Dulcie's voice in the hall just now, unless love is deaf as well as blind! I'll go and unearth him.'

'Please don't,' cried Dulcie; 'I came to see Aunt Dora and you. I see Morton at home, you know.'

'That's all very well, but he mustn't be inattentive. There goes the gong for luncheon. Auntie dear, you are looking ever so pale and fagged this morning. Have you and Tibbs been worrying over the house accounts?'

'No, dear, I never worry about accounts.'

I know you are a model housekeeper, you sweet old auntie, liberal without wastefulness, indulgent but never lax,' said Tiny. 'I'm afraid when I've a house everything in it will run to seed in a dreadful way for want of being looked after. I so detest the details of domesticity.'

The three ladies found Morton in the hall ready to escort Dulcie to the pretty, bright-looking dining-room, where the luncheon-table was all abloom with white and purple chrysanthemums, and where Horatia and Lizzie Hardman joined them at the social, unceremonious meal.

Among so many there was plenty of conversation, but neither Dora Blake nor her nephew took an active part in it. The young ladies discussed their favourite subjects, novels, crewel-work, conservatories, dress, and the floating gossip of the neighbourhood. There was a general light-heartedness which made up for Morton's silence and his aunt's abstracted manner.

'Now, dearest auntie, I want you to take me round the gardens, and show me the hothouses,' said Dulcie coaxingly, putting her arm through Miss Blake's as they rose from the table. 'I have made up my mind for an afternoon's talk with you, and I shall only go home in time to give papa his tea.'

'There is nothing I should like better, my pet,' answered Dora; 'but this afternoon it is impossible. I have to drive

to Highclere upon a matter of business. I must leave you to the three girls and Morton, who will be delighted to show you the houses—not that they contain anything very grand just now.'

'Business at Highclere, auntie!' said Tiny; 'what can that be? I hope you are not going to visit that horrid man in the jail to hear him his catechism, or to teach him to sing a hymn. You are quite capable of it.'

'No, dear, I am not going to the jail.'

'For these and all Thy mercies—' murmured Tiny, as if she were saying grace.

And then she wreathed her arm round Dulcie's waist, and appropriated her for the rest of the afternoon, allowing Morton to dance attendance upon them in and out of hothouses and greenhouses, and all over the spacious gardens. In Dulcie's company he managed to forget his perplexities, which had been increased by that unpleasant visit from Vargas's daughter.

CHAPTER XV.

DORA BLAKE ASKS A QUESTION.

Miss Blake drove into Highclere, and stopped just outside that quaint old town at a handsome red-brick house, with a lawn and shrubbery in front of it. This was the house of Sir Nathaniel Ritherdon, a gentleman of good old family, who had married the only daughter and heiress of a wealthy Blackford manufacturer, and had fortified his position by an alliance which his relations affected to despise. He was an elderly man, pompous but kindly, and very popular in the district. He had been one of Walter Blake's most intimate friends, and it seemed a natural thing for Dora to come to him in her trouble.

For the first time in her life she asked for the master of the house instead of the mistress.

'I want to see Sir Nathaniel on a matter of business,' she said; 'I shall be glad to see Lady Ritherdon afterwards.'

She was ushered at once into Sir Nathaniel's library—a room as portly, rubicund, and pompous as its owner. Tall mahogany bookcases, filled with formidable folios and fat octavos in crimson russia, crimson morocco armchairs, red and green Turkey carpet, crimson velvet curtains, crimson velvet mantelpiece, bronze clock ticking loud enough for a county jail, ruddy fire in shining steel grate. Sir Nathaniel's despatch box, big enough for a Prime Minister, open before him; Sir Nathaniel's presentation silver inkstand at his side; Sir Nathaniel himself indulging in a surreptitious nap.

He started up at the entrance of Miss Blake, and looked about

him for a moment or two, with a scared glance, like a guilty creature.

'Hum—haw—my dear Miss Blake, this is a pleasant surprise. I was so deeply absorbed in—aw—local cases that your name came upon me with — er — like — er — a reminiscence of by-gone days. Sit down, nearer the fire, pray now——'

'My dear Sir Nathaniel, forgive me for saying so, but your room is like a tropical house. I'd rather sit as far from the fire as I can.'

'Do you really find the room warm? I was absolutely feeling chilly. But at my age the blood circulates feebly. Have you seen Lady Ritherdon? If not, let me send for her; she will be delighted at this visit.'

'I am going to see her presently; but I want first to have a little quiet talk with you.'

'If I can be of service to you in any way——

'I believe you can, and to the cause of humanity. I hear that you have started a memorial to the Home Secretary in favour of Humphrey Vargas.'

'Well, really now, Miss Blake, I like to be conscientious even in small matters, and, to speak by the card, I must tell you that it was not I who set this memorial on foot, though my signature heads the list. It was Sir Everard Courtenay's idea. He was urgent about the matter on the night after the trial—stayed behind when my other guests had gone, on purpose to talk to me about it. He takes a very merciful view of the case, bearing in mind such extenuating circumstances as the man's age, his self-surrender, and so forth. Very good of him, isn't it? And yet Sir Everard has been thought rather a hard man—self-contained, wrapped up in his own sorrows, and his own immediate interests.'

'Yes, it is good in him,' Miss Blake said slowly, looking down at the crimson hearthrug with a thoughtful face. 'And I know that you are good, Sir Nathaniel, so I have come to plead the cause of a poor woman who was with me to-day, Vargas's daughter.'

'The woman who has come over from America?' interrogated Sir Nathaniel.

'Yes.'

'She has been with me this afternoon—an extraordinary woman, a little queer in her head, I'm afraid. She vehemently protests her father's innocence of the murder, and seems to believe it herself.'

'Then you know all I can tell you. It is on that poor woman's account I am here. I promised her that I would sign the memorial, and that I would do all in my power to promote its success. But my influence is so little. Now if you would take the matter in hand, Sir Nathaniel, success would be certain.'

Miss Blake knew that the high sheriff delighted in having something to be fussy about, some philanthropic or political excuse for making prosy speeches, and writing still prosier letters.

'My dear lady,' he responded with a gratified air, 'for your sake I would adopt even a worse cause. The woman impressed me as a lunatic; but if you have taken her under your wing she shall have the shelter of mine; and whatever I can do to secure a favourable answer to the memorial shall be done. We are not over-fond of hanging now-a-days, thank Heaven. We accept capital punishment as a terrible necessity; but we are very glad to slip out of inflicting it when we can find a reasonable excuse for mercy.'

There was a silence of a minute or so, while Sir Nathaniel shut his despatch-box, with the air of having done a hard day's work, and threw himself back in his red morocco chair, the hue of which exactly matched the port-winey tints in his own complexion.

He saw that his visitor was deep in thought, and solaced himself with a pinch of snuff out of his massive gold box, while he politely awaited her next observation.

'I think you were out hunting the day my brother was killed?' she said at last.

Sir Nathaniel was a little startled by the abruptness of the remark.

'Yes, poor fellow, I was with him. We rode together for some time.'

'Did he seem in his usual spirits?'

'Well, no, Miss Blake. That is a curious circumstance, which my memory dwelt on afterwards. Poor Blake was not in his accustomed good spirits. You know what a jolly fellow he was, what a glorious fellow. Of course you do; nobody can know it better. Well, on that fatal day he seemed depressed, absent, out of sorts. He rode wild too, and didn't seem to care where he went. Superstitious people have a notion that a man about to die a sudden or violent death has a presentiment of his fate, even in the heyday of health and strength. And my recollection of poor Blake's manner on that day would go far to justify the notion.'

'You do not know of his having had a dispute of any kind—a quarrel, even—with any one who was out that day?'

'A quarrel — Blake! The best-natured of men—a man whom everybody liked. Why, my dear Miss Blake, what could put such an idea into your head?'

'One can never be sure. A man may be kind and open-hearted, and yet may make enemies. Sir Everard Courtenay said at the trial that my brother was in his usual spirits. Do

you know if those two were riding together much during the day?'

Sir Nathaniel looked thoughtful. He was called upon to remember the details of a day's sport twenty years old. True that the day had been fatal to one of his friends, and that events otherwise insignificant had been made remarkable by the tragic sequel of the sport.

'Now you force me to carry back my memory to that particular occasion, it occurs to me that Blake and Sir Everard did not ride side by side once during the day's work. There was a good deal of waiting about; and it struck me, I remember, that Sir Everard and your brother were not quite so friendly as usual. They seemed to avoid each other, as if they didn't care about meeting. Mind you, the thing may have been only my imagination, but it certainly did occur to me at the time. Good God! could that have been in the counsel's mind when he put such curious questions to Sir Everard—could he know anything——'

'Mr. Blake,' announced the butler at this moment. He had opened the door with well-bred noiselessness half-a-minute before he made this announcement, and Morton Blake had heard the latter part of Sir Nathaniel's speech.

CHAPTER XVI.

'I MUST BE BEHIND THE AGE.'

'You here, Morton!' exclaimed Miss Blake, rising with an agitated air at her nephew's entrance.

'Yes, my dear aunt. How do you do, Sir Nathaniel? I heard my aunt was driving into Highclere, and I fancied she might be coming to see Lady Ritherdon.'

'I thought you would spend the rest of the afternoon with Dulcie,' said his aunt.

'Dulcie had had enough of the hothouses by four o'clock, so I put her into her pony carriage and rode over here. I want a little quiet talk with Sir Nathaniel when you've quite done with him.'

'Why should you not talk before me, Morton? I think I know what you want to talk about. It is a subject that concerns me as nearly as it does you. Cannot you trust me, Morton?'

'I don't know. I feel sometimes as if I could trust no one—as if I were surrounded by smooth-faced traitors. What is the meaning of this memorial, Sir Nathaniel, and why have you signed it? Surely if that man is guilty he deserves to die. There was never a more brutal murder—there was never a fitter subject for the gallows.'

'He is old and broken down,' faltered Sir Nathaniel.

'Is that any reason he should be spared? What is his wretched remnant of existence when weighed against my father's prime of life—full of hope and gladness and benevolent thoughts and deeds? Blood for blood—a life for a life. That is the divine law, which Christ came to fulfil and not to destroy.'

'Christ forgave the penitent thief; and this man is penitent,' pleaded Dora Blake.

'The only pardon his penitence can deserve is a pardon beyond the grave. Sir Nathaniel, I want to know whether this memorial was your idea?'

'It was not. Sir Everard Courtenay was the man who started it.'

'I thought as much. Sir Everard has taken a philanthropic view of this business from the outset. He has shown a scrupulous desire to avoid the shedding of blood.'

'My dear Blake, it is natural for you to feel strongly upon this subject, but you must consider that there is a growing prejudice against capital punishment.'

'I wish there was a growing prejudice against murder,' said Morton gloomily. 'What was it that you feared might be in the counsel's mind when he asked Sir Everard those extraordinary questions about his wife?'

Sir Nathaniel hesitated, and looked nervously at Miss Blake.

'Come, Sir Nathaniel, be frank with me. You were my father's friend.'

'Everybody who knew your father was his friend.'

'Yet the counsel suggested that he might have had a secret enemy, and the drift of his examination tended to show that Sir Everard Courtenay might have been that enemy. Sir Nathaniel, Aunt Dora, for God's sake do not try to keep me in the dark upon this subject if your knowledge can enlighten me. My father had been Lady Courtenay's suitor before her marriage. So much Sir Everard admitted. Do you know if there was any jealousy in Sir Everard's mind after his marriage? Do you know if he had any reason for resentment?'

'I never heard such an idea hinted,' said Sir Nathaniel decidedly. 'So far as I know, Lady Courtenay's character was spotless.'

'What was it then that you feared might be in the counsel's mind when he questioned Sir Everard?'

'It occurred to me during the hunt on the day before poor Blake's death that he and Sir Everard were not quite so friendly in their manner to each other as they had usually been. There was something that looked like a tacit avoidance on both sides. Remember, Blake, this may have been only a fancy on my part.'

'Possibly. Yet it is a circumstance to be remembered.'

'Morton,' cried Miss Blake, turning her pale, perturbed face

to her nephew with a look of tender entreaty, 'for Dulcie's sake, for your own, shut your mind against these vague suspicions. You cannot suppose that Sir Everard Courtenay, the man you have long known and respected, your father's old college friend, was in any manner implicated in that cruel murder

'Why does he try to save the murderer's life?'

'That is an act of common humanity.'

'I must be behind the age,' said Morton bitterly. 'I am sadly wanting in Christian-like compassion for my father's murderer. Come, Aunt Dora, Sir Nathaniel has frankly stated his opinion about Lady Courtenay. You were silent just now. Are you of the same opinion? Did you know anything in my father's lifetime of relations between him and Lady Courtenay which would have been likely to disturb Sir Everard's peace?'

'Nothing.'

'Then I am justified in believing that Mr. Tomplin's suggestions had no better foundation than a prurient imagination.'

'Assuredly Mr. Tomplin could know nothing.'

'Thank God. For Dulcie's sake; yes, for Dulcie's sake! Do you suppose I would willingly give my mind to any suspicion that involved her father? Yet doubts have forced themselves upon me—doubts that have made me miserable. Last night I heard it suggested that the man who murdered my father was on horseback, a horseman who followed him after the hunt; and now to-day this woman comes to me with her assertion of her father's innocence. and with an air of truth about her that has impressed me in spite of myself.'

'Such a belief is only natural in a daughter,' said Miss Blake.

'True; and Shafto Jebb's idea about the horseman may be mere folly. He is the kind of man who likes to originate some startling theory. I have been so worried about this matter that I'm afraid I left Dulcie rather hurriedly. I'll ride over to Fairview. Good-bye, Sir Nathaniel. Don't wait dinner for me, auntie.'

He left without waiting for another word, mounted his horse, and started at a sharp trot for Austhorpe, full of tender thoughts about Dulcie. He fancied that he had been careless, neglectful of her during her visit to the Manor House, and he was eager to make amends.

'My sweet Dulcie! And to think thatmy father once loved her mother! There seems a fatality in it. But I will not believe that my father could act dishonourably; that, having tried his chance and lost it, he would give his rival cause for jealousy. No. Everybody tells me that he was frank and open-hearted, true as steel. Such a man could never have stooped to treachery!

CHAPTER XVII.

COME TO GRIEF.

It was the 19th of December, two days before the Monday appointed for Humphrey Vargas's execution, and there had been as yet no commutation of the sentence. Very few people were thinking of the condemned criminal on this clear winter morning, for there were pleasanter subjects for thought amongst the crowd on Tangley Common, where the South Daleshire Hunt met for the first time this season. There had been a hunt breakfast at the Manor House, and Andrew and his subordinates were now going about with tankards and decanters for the refreshment of those horsemen who had not availed themselves of the opportunities indoors. Between thirty and forty horsemen were gathered on the smooth stretch of sward in front of the Manor House railings, and the road before the house was crowded with carriages. The hounds were clustered on a grassy knoll apart, with huntsman and whipper-in keeping guard over their movements, while the master trotted here and there on his powerful chestnut, big with the business of the day. There were half-a-dozen ladies among the red and dark coats; a brace of farmer's daughters, rosy-cheeked, buxom; Mrs. Upham, the lawyer's wife, who, according to popular opinion, ought to have been at home minding her children instead of scouring the country on her husband's gaunt gray gig-horse; Miss Morrison, a small squire's daughter, out with her father, a plethoric, sandy-whiskered man in a well-worn scarlet coat and mahogany tops; Mrs. Tilson Tudley, from Highclere, a half-pay major's wife; and lastly, on a perfect hunter, in a habit of perfect cut, with the neatest little chimney-pot hat, and the newest thing in white ties, Lady Frances Grange, the finest horsewoman in that part of Daleshire.

'How is it that the Blatchmardean people contrive to ride such good horses?' asked Mrs. Tilson Tudley of Mr. Upham, with an envious glance at Lady Frances's thorough-bred brown. I thought they were as poor as church mice.'

'So they are,' answered Jack Upham, replying for his wife, who had as much as she could do to keep her ungainly gray from getting his hind legs into a concatenation with the hind legs of other horses, all shifting and wheeling and fidgeting in their eagerness for the fray. 'They've precious little money for people in their position: but as Lord Blatchmardean never spends anything except upon his stables he contrives to cut a tidy figure there. He lets everything else at the castle run to seed.'

'I believe Lady Frances has hardly a second gown to her back,' said Mrs. Tudley; 'Lady Ritherdon told me that she was tired of seeing her in black net and yellow roses.'

'Yet she always looks well,' said Upham; 'she was out and

away the best dancer at the hospital ball—among the girls,' added the lawyer, reminded by a vindictive glance that the lady to whom he was talking prided herself particularly upon her waltzing.

'It's a pity she can't get married,' drawled Mrs. Tudley, languidly compassionate.

'Can't!' exclaimed Mrs. Upham. 'She's not much more than twenty, and she may never have seen anybody she cares about.'

'Oh, but don't you know girls in that rank are expected to marry young? A girl of that kind is brought up to make a good marriage, and if she doesn't do it in her second or third season she is stamped with failure. Now, Lady Fanny has had two seasons in London with her aunt, Lady Luffington, and nothing has come of it. I should put her down as a decided failure, though she really has very nice ways, and is rather good style.'

'Don't you think her pretty?'

'No,' said Mrs. Tudley decisively. 'Too thin, too brown, too angular.'

'But surely she has fine eyes?'

'I didn't say she was hideous,' retorted Mrs. Tudley, with acidity.

She had met Lady Frances at the hospital ball, and at Lady Ritherdon's annual garden party, which was an *omnium gatherum* for half the county, and on the strength of these two public encounters affected, in her conversation with people of Mrs. Upham's class, to be in the Blatchmardean set; but the consciousness that she was out of it gave a subdued sourness to her tone whenever Lady Frances was talked about.

That young lady and her brother, Lord Beville, had ridden into the Manor House shrubbery to talk to Dora Blake and her nieces. Lady Frances was bending from her saddle to say something confidential to Tiny, who was her particular favourite in the family. Morton was on the common with Sir Everard and his daughter, who had driven to the meet in a mail phaeton.

'I wonder why Miss Courtenay doesn't hunt,' speculated Frances, glancing across the laurels at the group on the common. 'Her father keeps plenty of horses. She might as well enjoy her life.'

'I don't know that she would care about it,' said Tiny, 'and I know Morton wouldn't like it.'

'Oh, he doesn't like women to hunt, I suppose?' said Lady Frances, reddening a little.

'Can't bear hunting women. If it wasn't for that I should hunt. Butterfly jumps beautifully, and she's considered my particular property, don't you know? But when I gently suggested riding her to hounds Morton looked as black as thunder,

and protested that no sister of his should ever unsex herself by scampering over hedges and ditches, and cannoning at gates, amongst a herd of rough farmers and impertinent cockneys. Rather narrow-minded of him, isn't it?'

'Well, it's hardly what I should have expected from an advanced Liberal; but I believe men who take a wide view in politics think themselves privileged to have narrow ideas about everything else. I wish you were coming with us, Tiny, all the same. I am sure you would enjoy it.'

'Enjoy it? I should fancy myself in heaven! If ever I marry a nice, biddable man, I shall hunt four times a week.'

Lord Beville rode in to say that they were moving, and Lady Frances trotted gaily off by his side, but the gaiety was rather in the movement of her lively young horse than in her own face, which was grave and even troubled.

They stopped to speak to Sir Everard and Dulcie, and to Morton, whose horse was drawn up beside the phaeton, and who seemed indifferent to the prospects of the day, in his delight at being with Dulcie.

She was looking her fairest and brightest, as if something had happened to put her in particular good spirits.

'We are going to draw Yarfield Gorse,' said Morton. 'You might drive a good way with us, Sir Everard.'

'Do, papa,' said Dulcie; so the phaeton followed among the horsemen, together with various pony chaises and family vehicles of the waggonette or inside-car species, which provoked some muttered animadversion from the hunting men.

It was a lovely morning, clear, balmy, with a warm south-west wind gently stirring the last leaves upon the young trees, and bearing in its breath the perfume of distant pine-woods, and the fresh, cool odour of newly-ploughed uplands; the sunshine lit up the ragged hedges, where the blackberry leaves still hung beautiful in their decay with every variety of tint, from green to bronze, from crimson to darkest purple, and where the hawthorn berries glittered like jewels against their russet background. The narrow winding river yonder in the valley reflected the blue of a sky that was almost without a cloud. Every vestage of last week's frost had disappeared.

Morton felt the influence of this genial atmosphere, the beauty of earth and sky. He was well mounted, and moderately fond of hunting—not an enthusiast like his father, but able to enjoy a good run in a pleasant country, with all nature smiling at him. A long day in a Scotch mist, over ground in which his horse sank to the shoulder, was not his idea of bliss, even though the scent lay well, and the run was popularly supposed to be the best of the season. To-day he was in excellent spirits. He had spent a good deal of his life with Dulcie during the last

week, and he had made up his mind to be happy. Yet even to-day, the sight of Shafto Jebb pounding along on a mealy chestnut unpleasantly recalled that conversation which he had overheard at the 'Sugar Loaves,' and gave him an uncomfortable feeling.

He was riding on a strip of turf beside the road, Lady Frances Grange and Lord Beville by his side. Morton and Frances were old friends. He and Beville had been together at Rugby, chums at school and at home, and Morton had been on the pleasantest terms at Blatchmardean ever since those old Rugby days. He was as much at his ease with Frances Grange as with his own sisters. Before his engagement to Dulcie he had been in the habit of spending a good deal of his leisure at Blatchmardean, playing billiards with Lord Beville, taking lessons in farming from the old earl, dawdling about the neglected gardens and shrubberies with Frances. At home he was always full of work, but at Blatchmardean, where nobody had any turn for industry, he was contented to waste his time. Blatchmardean was his place of rest and recreation. Then came his engagement to Sir Everard Courtenay's daughter, and it seemed as if all those idle hours in the library—to which nobody had added a book for the last forty years—in the billiard-room, and in the picturesque old gardens, were over and done with for ever. He called at the castle now and then, just often enough to escape the charge of neglecting old friends, but he dawdled away life there no longer. All his leisure was devoted to Dulcie.

Neither Frances nor her brother resented this defection. They accepted it as an inevitable consequence of new ties, a new and absorbing affection.

'Morton is terribly earnest,' said Beville; 'he never does anything by halves. I am glad neither you nor I take life as seriously as he does, Fan.'

Frances answered with a faint sigh.

'Perhaps we are wrong and he is right. Life may be a much more solemn business than we think, and its seriousness may be brought home to our frivolous minds one day in some unpleasant manner.'

Beville could not bring himself to the consideration of a question so metaphysical.

'I dont know about that,' he said. 'I hope we shall always manage to rub on somehow.'

Frances missed her old companion sorely at first, missed him always, indeed, for her friends at Blatchmardean were not many. The earl did not encourage society of any kind.

'We can just afford to keep ourselves,' he said; 'but we can't afford to be eaten out of house and home by other people.'

So there were no visitors coming to stay at the castle, no roster of guests, one set departing as another set arrived. No clubable men came from afar to shoot Lord Blatchmardean's pheasants, or to smoke in the big stone hall which served for lounge and billiard-room. Two or three times in the season the earl would ask a neighbour to join him in his day's sport, but for the rest of the time he and Beville and the gamekeeper shot the birds, and enjoyed their pic-nic luncheons of bread and cheese and Bass with a relish which not every man can experience whose mid-day appetite is coaxed by Périgord pies and choice liqueurs. Sometimes Frances was allowed to accompany her father and brother on their long tramps through boggy plantations, over deep beds of fallen leaves, and showed herself as good a shot as either of them. Beville had taught her to handle a gun before she was twelve years old, just as he had taught her to ride, and to fence, and to play cricket, making her his companion in all things.

It had happened, therefore, that Morton, being Beville's chosen chum, had become, in the common course of things, Lady Frances Grange's chief male friend—indeed, her only one—a little given to lecturing ; but if a girl likes a man she likes to be lectured by him ; not at all given to flattery ; but Lady Frances detested compliments. He had been kind and attentive to her always, bringing her such books as she cared to read, such songs as she cared to sing, all of the lightest and airiest character. He had taken care that she was supplied with flowers and fruit from the extensive hothouses at Tangley. He had made it a point with his womenkind that they should visit her, and invite her to their house, and make much of her. And then, just as the family at the Manor had made up their minds that Lady Frances Grange was to be Lady Frances Blake, Morton had fallen head over ears in love with Sir Everard Courtenay's daughter.

His aunt Dorothea went so far as to tell him that she had always supposed Frances would be his wife.

'My dearest aunt, what could put such an idea into your head?' he exclaimed, with a look of wonder which proclaimed his perfect innocence. 'I like Fan immensely. I am just as fond of her as I am of my sisters, but the notion of marrying her never came into my head.'

'All I hope is that it has never come into hers,' replied Miss Blake gravely. 'I used to wonder, certainly, that you should choose a girl brought up as she has been, with such exclusively masculine surroundings—a girl whose tastes are all masculine. But she is graceful and attractive, and I thought——'

'You thought quite wrong, dear auntie, as you far-seeing women often do, when you speculate about other people's affairs,' Morton answered lightly, and no more had ever been said upon the subject.

Miss Blake and her nieces still called upon Lady Frances Grange, and invited her to the Manor House; and the friendship, without being absolutely enthusiastic, went on pleasantly enough.

Nothing in Frances's manner from first to last indicated that she felt she had any right to be offended at Morton's choice, or that she was so offended. She talked freely of Dulcie, and praised her warmly.

'Your brother could not have made a better choice,' she said to Clementine and Horatia. 'You know that in a general way I detest girls—your sweet selves, of course, excepted—but I consider Dulcie simply perfect.'

. . . . . .

And now carriages and horses had arrived at Yarfield Gorse, a wild bit of land on the slope of a hill crested with fir trees, and here the serious business of the day began. There was a good deal of cantering about and about in a seemingly purposeless manner, which the people in the carriages were able to see; a good deal of dismounting and tightening of girths, and a general getting ready for the fray, and then all in a moment there came the shrill cry, 'Gone away,' the hounds went leaping and tumbling over the hillocky ground like a flash of living light, and the field rushed helter-skelter after them in a hand gallop, with Lady Frances and Morton in the first flight.

There was a narrow bit of plough, a hedge, and then a splendid stretch of pasture, where the quiet store cattle stood at gaze, wondering at the whoop and riot of the chase, as it sped by them and was gone. Perhaps as they settled down placidly to their grazing, they were half-disposed to believe that the whole thing had been a vision—a phenomenal appearance in the air.

'Stick by me,' cried Frances, looking round at Morton, as she took the hedge. 'I know every inch of the country. Isn't this glorious?' she asked, as they were galloping smoothly across the grass, neck and neck, with only the huntsman and a chosen few skimming along in front of them.

Morton could not deny that it was so, though he had made up his mind long ago that hunting women were detestable, and had told Tiny so when she wished to ride Butterfly to hounds. The fresh, clear air, the open country, the sense of being borne along by an animal powerful enough to carry him to the end of the earth, or at least to the edge of the horizon yonder, where the distant woods made a line of purple against the clear blue sky—all these filled him with delight. He forgot that this girl by whose side he rode was not Dulcie, that it was in some measure a treason against Dulcie that he should be utterly happy in her company; he forgot everything except the keen rapture

of being carried across that level pasture to the gap yonder through which the hounds were just scrambling.

And though he had stigmatized hunting as an unfeminine pursuit, he could but own to himself that Frances Grange had never looked more exquisitely girlish than at this moment, as her slight figure moved in sympathy with every movement of her horse, and the delicate oval of her cheek warmed with a flush of tenderest carmine, while her dark eyes sparkled with delight.

'He's making for the water!' she cried, 'and the bank's horridly risky! No matter—we can't lose them.'

'You'd better go round,' remonstrated Morton, 'there's a shallow ford lower down.'

'Go round!' she cried contemptuously; 'we might as well go to London. I shall risk the dip yonder. You needn't come unless you like. What's become of Beville?'

There was no one in front of them but the officials and the master, with about half a dozen of the hardest riders, amongst whom Frances could not distinguish her brother's figure. Behind them the field had scattered wide, some having found a gate in the corner of the pasture, while the rest had taken the hedge at different points.

Beville, who was always well to the fore, could hardly be among these; but there was no time to wonder about him. Fox and hounds were on the other side of the narrow river, and a few of the horsemen were scrambling down the bank, while the prudent ones galloped off to find an easier passage.

'There are a lot refusing,' cried Morton; 'you'd better come round.'

'Good-bye,' retorted Frances, waving her hunting crop.

Morton was not to be dismissed so cavalierly. He put his trust in Providence and a clever hunter, and followed Lady Frances.

The stream, about four feet deep, ran at the bottom of a hollow, the steep bank made dangerous by brushwood and mountain ashes and alders. There was hardly room for a horse to squeeze himself between the trees, and the clay bank was so rugged and treacherous that it needed a clever animal to keep his footing in the scramble down to the water. One man had had his ducking already, and was chasing his horse across the next field; but Frances did not accept this gentleman's disaster as a warning, kindly intended by Providence, for she thought herself better than any member of the South Daleshire.

'Some wretched stockbroker from London, I dare say,' she said to herself, as she steered her horse cautiously through the trees.

He got down the bank cleverly enough, but for some inexplicable reason chose to take objection to the water, and made a frantic rush for the opposite side. Here again there were trees and brushwood, and caution was needful; but caution is unavailing

with a horse gone suddenly mad. He made a wild bound out of the stream, dashed up the slippery bank, knocked his rider's head against a tree, and then rolled back into the water.

'Please somebody see that my horse isn't hurt,' cried Frances, as Morton pulled her out of her saddle, a dripping Diana, and then, stunned by the blow against the tree, she fainted in Mr. Blake's arms.

Happily his horse was strong enough to carry them both up the bank, while Lady Frances's thoroughbred struggled up on the other side, very little the worse for his bad behaviour, and was caught by Beville's groom, who had just come quietly up on his master's second horse.

The hounds were half over the next field by this time, and Morton was alone with Lady Frances, the groom looking at them with an air of respectful imperturbability from the opposite bank, as who should say, 'If she's dead I can't help it, and if she's alive I'm ready to obey orders. A hunting field is no place for the display of emotion.'

'I think we're out of it,' Morton said to himself, as he pulled up his horse, and stood with Frances in his arms, waiting for her to come to herself.

He remembered in the next moment that he had some bra in his hunting flask, but before he could put the bottle to lips, Lady Frances revived a little, opened her eyes, and looked dreamily about her.

'Where are the hounds?' she asked, not immediately aware of her somewhat singular position upon somebody else's horse.

'I'm afraid they're in the next county. Would you mind taking a little brandy? I'm sure you must be giddy and ill.'

'I feel as if I were in a merry-go-round,' answered Lady Frances. 'No, thank you; I couldn't possibly do it,' as he offered his brandy flask. 'Good gracious! Where's my horse?'

'On the other side of the river. Don't be frightened—your groom has got him. The brute isn't hurt.'

'I'm glad of that. I don't mind being smashed a little myself, but I wouldn't have Primus hurt for all the world, or at least as much of it as I'm entitled to.'

'Primus! Is that his name?'

'*Facile Primus.* Beville christened him. I believe it's about all the Latin he knows.'

She slipped out of Morton's arms, and dropped lightly to the ground, looking as bright as if nothing had happened, though she was very pale, and her habit was streaming with water, and plastered with clay.

'Are you sure Primus is all right, Brooks?' she called to the groom.

'Yes my lady, he's right enough, more shame for him.'

'Do you think we could catch them?' she asked Morton.

'You are a better judge than I am, but I am sure you ought not to ride any further to-day.'

'Perhaps you are right. My head is a little painful,' she said, putting her hand to her forehead. 'I suppose it's the effect of the tree.'

'There's a farmhouse on the Blackford Road, not half a mile off,' said Morton, who had dismounted before this. 'If you will let me put you on my horse, and lead him there, your groom could go back to Blatchmardean and send a carriage for you.'

'That seems an awfully spoony thing to do,' said Frances, 'and it's rather too bad that I should keep you out of all the fun.'

'I don't care a straw about the fun. I only want to take care of you.'

She was feeling faint and sick, and inclined rather to lie down on the grass, and let the world go by her than to make any kind of effort. So she allowed Morton to settle the matter for her, whereupon he tied up one stirrup, shortened the other, and mounted the lady on his own horse.

'We're going to Dawley's Farm,' he called to the groom; 'you can go back to Blatchmardean, and send a carriage to fetch your mistress.'

'What am I to do about Lord Beville's horse?' asked the groom.

'Do the best you can.'

The man went away dispirited. He had been going across country in his best style, though he was supposed to have been nursing his master's second horse in such a manner as to deliver up an unexhausted animal when the day's work was half over, and now he had to trot quietly back to Blatchmardean, leading the guilty Primus.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LINK BY LINK.

Holbrook Farm, with its low gray homestead, on the Blackford Road, belonged to the Blatchmardean estate, which would have been a fine property had it not been encumbered with the mortgages of a spendthrift race. The farmhouse, on this bright wintry day, had that air of unearthly quiet which such places are apt to wear in the early afternoon.

Morton led his charge in at the wide gateway, and round the gravelled sweep to the moss-grown old porch. There was an old-fashioned garden in front of the house, more useful than ornamental, and in the rear there were barns and rickyards which

dwarfed the low, irregular homestead. On one side spread level pastures, on the other there was an orchard, bounded by a ploughed field. Everything had a look of Sunday afternoon repose. The sound of the horse's hoofs plish-plashing on the soft road seemed almost a startling interruption of the all-pervading peace.

'The place looks as if there was not a living creature within call,' said Morton; 'but I suppose we shall unearth somebody if we try very hard.'

He pulled an iron ring which hung from a rusty chain in the porch, and far away at the back of the premises there sounded the cling-clang of a hoarse and feeble bell. After waiting two or three minutes he repeated this operation, but without any effect whatever. So he bethought himself that his own lungs might be stronger than the decrepit old bell, and he gave a stentorian shout of 'House!' This set a bass dog and a tenor dog barking in an excited duet, which momentarily increased in vehemence; whereupon came the sound of pattens clicking along a stone passage, and the door was opened by a ruddy-cheeked, plump, wholesome female, smelling of the dairy.

'Did you please to ring, sir?' she inquired, and then seeing Lady Frances on the horse, she exclaimed, 'Lord bless us and keep us, if it isn't my lord's daughter, looking as white as a curd!'

'Yes, it is I, Mrs. Dawley,' answered Frances, slipping off her masculine saddle, and alighting on the gravel path, where Morton supported her with one arm while he held the somewhat fidgety horse with the other. 'I've had something in the way of a fall, as you may see from the state of my habit. I've come to ask for your hospitality until the carriage from Blatchmardean fetches me.'

'Lor, my lady, you're free and welcome to anything this house holds. You must have some dry clothes first thing, if you'll be so kind as to step upstairs with me. My gowns won't fit you, my lady, but dry things are better than wet things any ay.'

Lady Frances hesitated, and looked down at her habit.

'Do you think it matters?' she asked. 'I've had a ducking before to-day, and I dare say the carriage will be here in half-an-hour.'

'My dear Fanny, don't be foolish!' expostulated Morton. 'Unless you have an ardent desire for an attack of pleurisy or rheumatic fever, you'd better accept this good woman's offer.'

'My clothes are homely, my lady, but they're clean,' said Mrs. Dawley

'My good soul, do you suppose I don't know that? Well, if you don't mind the trouble of lending me a gown, I suppose I'd better get off this wet habit. I begin to feel rather shivery.'

'Phœbe, called the matron, whereat a red-haired damsel, with bare arms and canvas apron, issued from the back premises, 'just set a light to the fire in the best parlour, and put the kettle on in the kitchen. Perhaps you'll be so good as to step into the parlour, sir, while my lady changes her clothes.'

'With pleasure,' answered Morton, 'if you'll kindly allow somebody to take care of my horse.'

'Phœbe, just you run and call Bill to take the gentleman's horse round to the stable.'

Mrs. Dawley opened the door of a large, low sitting-room, and ushered in Morton, having already made up her mind that he was Lady Frances Grange's 'young man.' Had he not called her his dear Fanny, and assumed a tone of authority which no ordinary acquaintance would venture to use towards an earl's daughter?

Upstairs in the lavender-scented, dimity-curtained bedroom Frances made her hasty toilet, laughing a good deal the while at the absurdity of the situation, though she was still so weak and giddy that it was as much as she could do to stand without Mrs. Dawley's help. With the aid of that hospitable matron she contrived to array herself in a starched white petticoat and a gaudy printed flannel morning gown, which Mrs. Dawley informed her had been her sitting-up dress after the birth of her last baby.

'Dawley saw the stuff at the draper's in Highclere, one market day, and took a fancy to it because it was a cheerful pattern,' she explained.

Lady Frances smiled at her image in the glass, her pallid face made whiter by the orange, and blue, and red in the cheerful-patterned dressing-gown. There was a tasselled girdle with which she was able to tighten that ample garment round her slim waist.

'I'll have your habit dried and brushed by the time you want to go home, my lady, so you needn't be afraid of having to go back to your pa looking an object,' said the farmer's wife. 'And now your ladyship must have some refreshment, something warm and comforting. I should say that the best thing you could take would be half a tumbler of brandy and water, hot, sweet, and strong.'

'My dear soul, not for the world.'

'A glass of sherry wine negus, then?'

'Please, if I am to have anything, let it be a cup of tea.'

'Of course, my lady, if your ladyship likes. Will you come down to the sitting-room and rest a bit on the sofa, or would you like to lie down on the spare bed and take a little nap?'

'No, thank you, Mrs. Dawley, I feel too excited to sleep. I'm so vexed at having lost the run. I think I'd better go downstairs

and tell Mr. Blake that he needn't stay. There's not the least need for him to stop now that I am in such comfortable quarters.'

'Lor, my lady, he'll stop, you may be sure. He won't want to go away,' said Mrs. Dawley, with a grin that was like a burst of sunshine.

Frances went slowly downstairs, holding the banister-rail as she went, and feeling very faint and tottery. Morton was standing at the window, looking out at the wintry landscape. There was a cheerful fire of turf and wood in the capacious grate. The farmhouse parlour, with its drab wainscot and gay chintz curtains, had a pleasant old-world aspect. Mrs. Dawley came bustling in with the tea-tray, and began to lay the table with a homespun cloth, on which she set forth her best teapot, her old Staffordshire cups and saucers, a home-made loaf, a dish of golden-tinted butter, and a substantial cut-and-come again plum cake.

'Now, Morton, I want you to go about your business immediately,' said Frances, settling herself in the roomy chintz-covered armchair by the fire. 'Mrs. Dawley will take care of me till the carriage comes from Blatchmardean. If you ride cleverly you may manage to fall in with the hounds.'

'Thank you, Fanny, I know when I am well off,' replied Morton, smiling at her. 'I am not going to pound over half the county in a futile endeavour to come up with the hounds. I had much rather sit by this comfortable fire and enjoy a dish of Mrs. Dawley's tea.'

'The farmer's wife, busy with the arrangement of her tea-table, heard this conversation, and made up her mind that Lady Frances's young man was all that a lover should be.

'But it seems too absurd that you should waste your day in dancing attendance upon me,' said Frances, sipping her tea, when Mrs. Dawley had replenished the bright wood fire, and left her visitors to themselves.

'I see nothing absurd in the matter, and it is rather advantageous to me. I have been out of gear for my ordinary pursuits of late, haven't been able to "frame" to anything, as the Lancashire folks say; and it is a relief to me to waste a few hours in cheerful society.'

Frances remembered the time when he had spent the greater part of his leisure in her company, and wondered if it seemed strange to him to renew the old easy-going companionship, as if it were a dropped thread in the fabric of his life, which he was trying to take up again.

'Why do you never bring Dulcie to see me?' she asked. 'I am not able to invite her in a formal way, for you know that my father sets his face against all ceremonious entertainments, for

the simple reason that he can't afford them. We had to make our choice between stables and general society; and as we are all much fonder of horses than of the ruck of our fellow-creatures, we chose stables. But so far as five o'clock tea goes, I am allowed to be as hospitable as I like; and I believe Beville can always give his friends Apollinaris or St. Galmier. You might bring Dulcie to Blatchmardean now and then to waste an afternoon with you. I know that it is a dull, shabby old place.'

'It is a dear old place,' protested Morton: 'some of the happiest hours of my life were spent there.'

'You must not say that.'

'Yes I must. Do you suppose a man does not know what happiness means until he falls in love? I may have found out another and more intense happiness since those days, but why should I not admit that those days were very happy?'

Frances did not argue the point. She felt a curious gladness at the idea that he had once taken pleasure in her company—that those idle hours at Blatchmardean had been sweet to him, though perhaps not so sweet to him as they had been to her, nor yet so dear to look back upon. She was silent for a little while, watching the burning wood as it blazed and reddened, and crumbled away into white ashes. It seemed almost an emblem of life and love—a passionate flame—the deep red glow of feeling—and then coldness and pallid ashes.

'Do you remember how you used to lecture me in those juvenile days of mine?' asked Frances presently. 'I am sure I deserved it, for I know I must have been an unmitigated hoyden.'

'If I did presume to lecture the process must have been beneficial, for I'm sure nobody could find fault with you now,' said Morton, smiling at her as she lay back in her deep armchair, with the pretty boyish head reclining against the chintz cushion.

'Now, Morton, if you talk like that I shall know that our friendship is at an end,' she remonstrated. 'If I am to believe that you retain the least vestige of your brotherly regard for your friend's sister you must go on lecturing. Tiny tells me that you strongly disapprove of a woman hunting.'

'Tiny takes my particular objection for a general one. I certainly did object to the idea of Tiny riding Butterfly to hounds: partly out of regard for the mare, and perhaps——'

'Be truthful, now, Morton, or you will sink fathoms deep in my respect.'

'Perhaps a little because I think that a girl who has not been, as it were, born in a hunting field, may as well keep out of it altogether. But for a girl who rides as you do, and who has been brought up as you have——'

'One-third in the nursery, and two-thirds in the stable and saddle-room. Yes, I understand, Morton—for me it is different. I am outside the pale.'

'How can you say such things, Fanny?'

'How can I help thinking them, and what does it matter whether I say them or leave them unsaid? They are true. I must pay the penalty for having been brought up with a brother for my only companion—loving the sports he loves—caring for none of the things that other girls care for—having few feminine vanities and fewer feminine virtues.'

'My dear Fanny, you must know, in your heart of hearts, that you are charming, and that there are plenty of men in the world who would rave about you!'

'Yes, but they are just the kind of men I should detest. I hope you don't suppose because I adore horses that I like horsey men. The quadruped is all that is admirable; but I draw the line at the biped.'

'And no doubt you will have your reward. Some man who is the very reverse of horsey—who never jumped so much as a gully—some grave young senator or enthusiastic scientist will fall over head and ears in love with my pretty Fanny, and wean her heart from stables and saddle-room.'

'When that bright particular star appears on my horizon I will let you know,' answered Fanny. 'If my poor Primus had broken his back to-day I don't think I should ever have hunted again,' she went on musingly. 'I never could have got over his death.'

Mrs. Dawley came in with more logs and more turf to replenish the fire. She had changed her gown in honour of her visitor, and had put on a smart cap.

'I hope you are feeling better by this time, my lady,' she said.

'I am feeling as well as I ever felt in my life, except that I am dreadfully savage with myself for being out of what I know will be described to me as the very best run of the season. It always is when one isn't in it.'

'Lor, my lady, but you've had so many of 'em, one more or less can't count. You've got quite a pretty collection of foxes' tails hanging up in your boodwower, I'll be bound.'

'I never saw a fox's tail in my life, Mrs. Dawley,' answered Frances gravely; 'but when I was a child the huntsman gave me a brush or two. He left off doing so ages ago, when the business began to get monotonous. Now, please, sit down, and make yourself at home in your own parlour, and let us have a chat.'

'I'm sure I shall be too pleased, my lady, if I don't intrude.'

'My dear soul, how *can* you intrude in your own parlour?'

'Circumstances alter cases, my lady, and I hope I know what's due to my lord's daughter.'

'If you are so ceremonious I shall think you have forgotten the days when Beville and I used to camp out on Ailsa Common, and used to come here for cream and eggs and butter for our gipsy tea.'

'I remember it all as well as if it was yesterday, my lady—two rare young pickles you was, begging your ladyship's pardon—regular young Turks.'

'Ah, I see you have not forgotten,' said Frances. 'Now do sit in that nice chair by the fire, and tell me all the news of the neighbourhood. What is there going on just now—courtships, marriages, deaths, and burials?'

'Well, my lady, there ain't much,' replied Mrs. Dawley, smoothing her black silk apron, and seating herself with ceremonious stiffness in the chair opposite Lady Frances, Morton having wheeled his own chair round to make room for her. 'I did think we should have had a funeral this side of Christmas, for farmer Briarwood's asthma seemed as if it was coming to a head; but he do linger and linger, poor soul, and I shouldn't be surprised if he was to last till the March brewings. It's a dead-and-alive place, this, my lady, neighbours few and far between, you see; and there ain't much doing any time, except at harvest homes, and such like. The only thing folks have been talking about lately has been this trial for murder at Highclere.'

Frances was going to stop her, but Morton gave her a look and put his finger to his lips, as much as to say, 'Let her go on.'

'Oh, your neighbours talk of the trial, do they?' he said, in an encouraging tone.

'Yes, sir, they do. You see it's such a queer story altogether, a man giving himself up after twenty years. It's only natural folks should talk about it. My master was at the trial—he said you might have heard a pin drop, in particular when the lawyer was questioning Sir Everard Courtenay, asking him the most cutting questions about his poor dead wife, just as if he was the lowest day-labourer in the land, instead of one of the leading gentry. Them lawyers didn't ought to be allowed such licence, I say. It was a shame to bring Lady Courtenay's name into it, after she's been lying in her grave these twenty years.'

'You speak as if you felt a particular interest in Lady Courtenay,' said Morton, intent upon the woman's every word. 'Did you know her?'

'No, sir, I can't say that I did; but I've seen her driving through Highclere on a market day when I used to go there to do my shopping. She was the prettiest woman I ever saw in my life; but there was something delicate, what you might call vanishing like, about her, as made one think she wasn't long for this world. I used to hear a great deal about her years ago when I was a young woman, and when she was Miss Alice Rothney;

for my father kept the shop in the village next Templewood, Lord George Rothney's seat, and my first cousin, Lucy Stevens, was in service there. She was own maid to the three Miss Rothneys, and she had a pretty hard place, for Lord George wasn't rich, and didn't keep any more cats than could catch mice, I can tell you, my lady. Miss Alice was so fond of our Lucy that when she married Sir Everard Courtenay nothing would do but Lucy must go abroad with her as her maid, and she was with her till the poor young lady's death, which happened, as you must have heard, my lady, within a year of her marriage, and on the very night after Mr. Blake's murder. Ah ! that was a black night for Austhorpe, and well might the church bell be set tolling at midnight. I've heard Austhorpe people speak of it many a time. It was a clear, frosty night, and the bell was heard for miles round, scaring the children and the old folks in their beds. There were some that woke up startled, thinking it was the end of the world, and the bell calling them to judgment !'

Mrs. Dawley dwelt on these gloomy memories with a ghoulish gusto, as she sat blinking at the cheerful fire and enjoying the unusual luxury of repose in the middle of the afternoon.

'Is your cousin still living ?' inquired Morton.

'Well, sir, she is, and when you've said that you've said all,' returned Mrs. Dawley, 'for a weaker, sicklier, more fretful creature to be alive you could hardly find between here and London. And yet she was a bright, pretty-looking girl enough when she was at Templewood. But after Lady Courtenay's death she took to wandering like, and went from place to place, a regular rolling stone, and then when she was thirty-three years of age,and ought to have known better, she took and married a young man in the musical line, and there they are starving genteelly in a back street at Avonmore. He keeps a music shop, and tunes pianos, when he can get any to tune, and plays the cornet at concerts and balls, and even circuses when he can get employed ; and she does a little millinery, and between them they might do pretty well, I dare say, if he wasn't wild and rackety in his ways, but as it is they just manage to keep the wolf from the door. My husband's very good, and lets me send poor Lucy a well-filled hamper once a quarter or so ; and I don't suppose they ever have a real good satisfying dinner except when they get one of my legs of pork and a pair of my barn-door fowls.'

'What is the musical gentleman's name ?' asked Morton, as if with a polite desire to keep up the conversation.

Frances had lapsed into a dreamy state, and sat looking idly at the fire.

'His name is Green, sir, Charles Churchill Green ; though it's my private opinion that he has no better right to call himself Churchill than I have to call myself Nebuchadnezzar,' answered

Mrs. Dawley, bridling a little as she smoothed her apron, 'and a precious deal he thinks of himself. As my husband says, in his witty way, you might turn a pretty penny if you could buy him at your price and sell him at his own. When he married our Lucy he pretended that his father was a gentleman of property in London, but Lucy found out afterwards that his property was a livery-yard in Lambeth, and that he'd been bankrupt three times. The airs this Churchill gives himself, all on the strength of a slim figure, a small foot, and rather a pretty talent for music! And he's such a flighty and flirty young fellow, that poor Lucy's life has been a misery to her ever since she married him. But, as my husband says, in his deep, far-seeing way, "As you make your bed so you must lie upon it."'

'Does your cousin ever pay you a visit here?'

'Well, no, she's never been since her marriage. First and foremost, if she was to leave Green to his own devices for a week or two she'd be miserable all the time, taking it into her head that he was going to elope with a countess, or something of that kind; for she thinks there never was such a man as that blessed husband of hers, and that the highest ladies in Avonmore are ready to fall in love with him; secondly, because Dawley don't like doleful people, and poor Lucy has been all in the miserables ever since she married. So you see, as it's my first duty to please my husband, I don't ask her, though I dare say our fine country air and good living would freshen her up a bit. Once in a way, when I've got a leisure day, and the gig-horse isn't wanted for the plough, I drive over to Avonmore and take a cup of tea with her, and hear her talk of her troubles, and I know that does her good.'

'Don't you think the carriage ought to have been here by this time?' asked Frances, to whom the conversation had become somewhat uninteresting, 'Brooks must have got to Blatchmardean an hour and a half ago, unless he absolutely crawled. I think I'd better put on my habit, Mrs. Dawley, if it's nearly dry.'

'I'm afraid it won't be anything like dry yet awhile, my lady,' said the farmer's wife, 'though it's hanging as near the kitchen fire as I could venture to put it.'

'Perhaps your people will have the sense to send you over some clothes,' said Morton. 'Brooks knew you had been in the water.'

'And Brooks is a nice fatherly man. Yes, I dare say they'll send me some dry garments, and I can take my habit home in a bundle. An ignominious close to an ignominious day, isn't it, Morton?'

'You can afford to end ignominiously for once in your life. You have had a long career of triumphs.'

'Barren honours, worthless laurels!' exclaimed Frances, with a laugh that was half-sad, half-cynical.

There came the sound of carriage wheels as she spoke, and she sprang out of her deep chair to run to the window.

'Yes, here is the brougham, and my good old Moulty, I declare; and now, Morton, you may consider your duty at an end: so you can mount your horse, and ride away. I hope you don't hate me for having caused you to waste a day.'

'I never spent a day less wastefully,' answered Morton gravely.

'How solemn you look as you say that! Well, it is a very pretty compliment to Mrs. Dawley and me, especially Mrs. Dawley, for I'm sure she has done the best part of the talking. Here comes Miss Moulton with a carpet-bag; and now, if I may go up to your room once more, Mrs. Dawley, I'll get ready to go home.'

She ran out of the room, and almost tumbled into the arms of a stout, comfortable-looking, middle-aged woman, who had come to Blatchmardean eleven years ago as Lady Frances Grange's governess, and who stayed there now as the girl's guide, philosopher, and friend. She had striven conscientiously to teach so long as Frances would consent to be taught; she had tried to stock her pupil's mind with the most solid goods in the way of information; she had laboured assiduously to impart languages, and histories, and ologies, but all her efforts in the teaching line had been futile, and Fanny had hardly learnt anything from her governess except a sincere respect and love for that worthy person.

'You dear! how good of you to come!' cried Frances. 'Come upstairs, and I'll tell you my adventures while I change my gown.'

'My darling, they told me you had been half-drowned.'

'Only ducked, Curly, dear; drowned is far too dignified a word.'

She had surnamed her governess Curly on the strength of two bunches of old-fashioned ringlets which shaded Miss Moulton's plump cheeks.

'Isn't the word a little vulgar?'

'Of course, dear. Haven't I a natural leaning that way?' asked Frances gaily.

Morton went out to look for his horse while Frances was dressing, and having ordered that animal to be in readiness for him, he walked up and down the gravel path in front of the house, waiting to hand Lady Frances into her carriage before he rode off. He was impatient to be gone, and it seemed to him that the lady was unduly long at her toilet.

'Here is a leaf in the book of the past,' he said to himself, reflecting upon what he had heard from Mrs. Dawley.

CHAPTER XIX.

BLATCHMARDEAN CASTLE.

THE visitor who came to Blatchmardean for the first time was apt to be reminded of the castle of the sleeping beauty in the wood. There was an air of neglect about everything, except the stable, which was suggestive of a century's slumber. There was the stillness of a house in which every one was steeped in an after-dinner nap. There were more cobwebs than are generally permitted in the waking world. More dust lay in the disused reception rooms than was consistent with the dignity of a waking earl's household. The wide-spreading park that screened the castle from the outside world had grown and thickened since the present Lord Blatchmardean had come into his own. He loved the old beeches that he had climbed and birdnested in as a boy; he loved the young oaks that he had seen planted; and sorely as he had sometimes needed the money those trees might have brought him, Lord Blatchmardean had been strictly conservative of the timber on his estate. He was indeed in all things a moderate man, living moderately, taking his pleasure in few and simple things, fond of his horse and dog and gun, loving to potter about the sixty or seventy acres which he reserved for his own cultivation, and fancying himself a shining light in modern agriculture.

He was a harmless, well-meaning man, and had never been known to deal hardly with his children, seldom even to speak harshly to them. He had let them grow up very much as they liked, exacting little from them, and giving the least he could. He had just contrived to find the money for Beville's education at Rugby and Christchurch; but that young nobleman had not been able to indulge in any of those expensive follies which are, as it were, the rosebuds that University youth gathers while it may, no matter how many thorns it may find sticking in its fingers after the rosebuds are faded. Beville and his sister were fond of their father in their own characteristic way—talking of him lightly as the Pater, the Sheik, the Ancient Mariner, or by any other title which a frivolous fancy suggested to them; but of that deep and serious love which goes hand in hand with reverence they had no idea. Such love as Dulcie felt for her father was not within the compass of these lighter natures. They were faithful to the old earl, after their fashion, and would have resented any disrespect offered to him by an outsider; and this familiar, easy-going affection being Lord Blatchmardean's highest idea of filial piety, he was thoroughly satisfied with the tribute offered to him. He loved and praised his children, and had no eye for their faults and shortcomings.

Beville was the dearest boy in the world, and the best shot in

the shire; Fan sat her horse to perfection, and had the lightest hands that ever steered a fretful hunter across country. That either boy or girl needed higher accomplishments or a wider culture had never entered into Lord Blatchmardean's head.

The sleepy old castle was a curious mixture of ancient splendour, neglect, forlornness, and modern comfort. There were spacious suites of rooms that had not been used for fifty years, and which the housemaids, reluctant, and yawning at their profitless work, visited at long intervals, with their brooms and brushes, scaring spiders that had grown bloated in undisturbed plenty, and setting vagabond mice scrambling and scuffling in their warren behind the panelling—grand old rooms, in which stately banquets and receptions had been held in days gone by, and where, a few years ago, Beville and his sister had played hide-and-seek in the dusky winter afternoons. Seldom did any one, save the housekeeper and housemaids, or now and then an inquisitive tourist who forced his way into the house, enter those rooms now. Lord Blatchmardean and his son and daughter lived in a nest of quaint, low-ceiled parlours opening into an old Dutch garden, and had their bedchambers and private dens in the corresponding rooms on the floor above ; leaving all the stately part of the house to the rats, and mice, and cobwebs, and housemaids, except the big central hall, which was used as a billiard-room and general lounge by Lady Frances and the two gentlemen, and served also as a smoking-room for Beville and the few friends whom he occasionally entertained at Blatchmardean.

Shabby and faded though the house was, it was not without interest and picturesqueness. The fine stone hall, with its huge fireplace, the wide staircase leading to the echoing gallery above, the vaulted roof, whence hung ragged silken banners that told of days when Grange was a name known in the lists of chivalry; the grim old portraits, the antique furniture, all had a charm that belongs to things that have a history. The contrast between the spacious splendour of the disused rooms and the cosy comfort and snugness of the garden parlours had a piquant effect; and people who came to Blatchmardean for the first time, after being chilled and awed by deserted banquet halls, and mouldy withdrawing-rooms, were delighted with the sunny sitting-rooms, facing south, papered with birds and butterflies, bright with chintz hangings and odds and ends of old china, and deliciously rococo cabinets and tea tables. Lady Frances and her governess had arranged the rooms between them, nine years ago, and it had been Miss Moulton's favourite task ever since to keep them in exquisite order; and this office of hers was by no means a sinecure, as Frances was the most harum-scarum and untidy of girls, and left litter and confusion behind her wherever she went.

'I wonder what would become of you all if I were not here?' asked Miss Moulton, as she bustled about the little drawing-room, shutting up workboxes, tidying bookstands, and arranging writing-tables. 'I really think you and Lord Beville are the most littery young people in the world.'

'Littery instead of literary,' cried Frances. 'It's only a difference of a letter or two. What would become of us, Curly, if you were to go away? Why, in the first place we should expire of grief in less than a week, and in the second Blatchmardean would be a pigsty before the end of a fortnight. I am like Hamlet, don't you know, dear? I wasn't born to set things right.'

'You are not quoting correctly, Frances.'

'Of course not. I never do. I always adapt my quotations to suit my text. Is not that what they do in the newspapers?'

Sarah Moulton shrugged her plump shoulders, and gave a little laugh. She was much too fond of Frances to be severe. As long as the lessons had lasted she had done her uttermost to be strict with her pupil. She had insisted on having the correct date of Julius Cæsar's assassination—the right number of petals for each order of plants—the exact constituents of conglomerate—the precise place of old red sandstone in the geological scale. But now it was all over. On her eighteenth birthday Lady Frances had shut up her books and vowed that she would learn no more. She was finished—she was to make her curtsey at St. James's, under the wing of Lady Luffington, her maternal aunt, at the first drawing-room.

'I am an emancipated young woman,' she exclaimed, 'and I shall never learn any more.'

'I should be puzzled to know how much you have learned,' said Miss Moulton.

'Take it the other way, Curly sweet, and be content with knowing how little. I never did take kindly to the Pierian spring, did I, dear? Perhaps I didn't drink deep enough to enjoy it.

'And now I suppose I had better look out for a new situation,' said Miss Moulton.

'Sarah Moulton, alias Curly, alias Sally, alias the dearest woman in the world, how can you ask such a heartless question?' said Frances, with her arms round the good soul's neck. 'Yes, I know I'm rumpling your collar, but I can't help it. How can you talk of leaving us? Don't you know you're a kind of adopted aunt, one of those indulgent maiden aunts one reads of in story books—that Beville adores you—as he ought, considering that you've spoiled him abominably—that the earl looks up to you as the prop of his house—now, Sally, it is quite too bad of you.'

'My darling,' exclaimed Miss Moulton, betwixt laughing and

crying, 'you ought to know that I have no higher wish than to end my days with you.'

'Well, I hope I do know it, Moulty dear; but when you talked of a new situation you staggered me.'

'My love, I thought that if you were to leave off trying to improve your mind, I should be useless here.'

'Useless! Why, you are useful in a thousand ways. You are the keystone of our domestic arch. We should tumble to pieces without you.'

Thus it was that Miss Moulton remained at the castle after her pupil's education was nominally finished. In her conscientiousness she strove even now to cultivate Lady Frances's mind, ungrateful though the soil might be, and was perpetually scattering intellectual seed, in the shape of stray scraps of information, which might or might not germinate in due season.

Miss Moulton had felt deeply disappointed when Morton Blake announced his engagement to Dulcie. She had long cherished the hope of seeing her beloved pupil happily married to a man of high principles and respectable position in the county. Morton Blake, with his plebeian ancestry, and moderate estate, would not have been a brilliant match for the daughter of a wealthy earl; but he would have been an eligible husband for a girl whose father had as much as he could do to maintain his sorely-shrunken establishment, and to keep out of debt. Carefully as Frances had hidden the secrets of her wounded heart, even from the loving eye of her governess, Miss Moulton knew that the heart had been wounded, that underneath the lightness, and even recklessness, of Fanny's character, there existed the capacity for deepest feeling. The good woman was angry with Morton for his coldness, his dulness—angry with him that he could have lived in closest friendship with so lovable a being, and yet have withheld his love. Little spurts of angry feeling flashed out of her now and then in her talk about Morton, whereupon Frances always took up the cudgels in his behalf.

'I can't think why you are so hard upon him, Moulty,' she would say. 'I'm sure he is always respectful, and altogether nice in his manner to you.'

'My dear, the man is a gentleman, I am not going to deny that. But I shall always think that he made a convenience of Blatchmardean Castle—coming here two or three afternoons a week, and wasting your time idling about the gardens.'

'I should have wasted it for myself, Curly dear, if he hadn't done it for me.'

'And now that he is engaged to Miss Courtenay we are to consider ourselves honoured if he calls once a month.'

'I don't think he has any idea of honouring us, Curly love. Of course all his leisure now is devoted to Dulcie.'

'A man should be loyal to friendship even if he choose to fall in love. What Morton can have seen in Miss Courtenay I have never been able to fathom.'

'Haven't you really, my Moulty? Why, first and foremost he must have seen out and away the loveliest girl in this part of the world. And then Dulcie is altogether sweet and lovable. She is accomplished too—plays exquisitely, paints admirably, has read more books than I have ever seen the outside of. Why, Moulty, she is a pearl of girls, and you know it. I think Morton is very lucky to have won her.'

'Well, my love, if you are satisfied I suppose I ought to be content,' said Miss Moulton with a sigh.

Frances laughed, and ran off to the stable with her apron full of bread for the horses, and presently she stood leaning her cheek against the shoulder of her favourite brown, in the dusk of a large loose box, while some slow tears crept down her cheek.

'Satisfied,' she repeated to herself. 'Yes, I am satisfied that the only man I ever cared for had never a thought for me; that after knowing every secret of my soul, except one, after being for five years my chief friend and counsellor, he could coolly turn his back upon me and give his love to another girl. It is hard to bear, and you make it a little harder for me, sometimes, Moulty, without knowing it.'

CHAPTER XX.

A FOUNTAIN OF BITTER WATERS.

THE first thing Morton heard when he went home from Dawley's farm that December afternoon was that a favourable reply had been received from the Home Secretary. Humphrey Vargas's sentence had been commuted to penal servitude for life.

'I suppose the philanthropists and humanitarians will be satisfied now,' said Morton savagely, 'Sir Everard Courtenay especially.'

He was to dine at Fairview that evening. He found Dulcie and her father in the morning-room; Sir Everard in his favourite chair by the fire, his book-table and reading lamp by his side; Dulcie at the piano, playing one of Chopin's wailing waltzes, a strain as plaintive as the moaning of the wind through an Æolian harp.

She left off playing, and rose to greet her lover, while Sir Everard looked up from his book to give Morton a friendly nod.

'Was it a grand day's sport?' Dulcie asked as they sat side by side on the sofa in front of the fire. 'You went off in dashing style. Had you a good run?'

'I had no run at all,' answered Morton; and then he gave a brief sketch of Lady Frances Grange's adventure.

'Poor thing,' cried Dulcie; 'how dreadful! She might have been killed, might she not?'

'Yes, if her horse had rolled over her when he fell back into the water it might have been fatal. She was in great danger, no doubt.'

'Was she frightened?'

'Not in the least. She doesn't know what fear means. But she was stunned by the blow against the tree, and was quite insensible when I dragged her off her horse.'

'How good of you to take care of her!'

'Good of me! Why, you would not have had me leave her to a groom, and go after the hounds!'

'I suppose that is what an enthusiastic sportsman would have done,' said Dulcie laughingly.

'You forget that Morton and Lady Frances are friends of long standing,' said Sir Everard. 'He would hardly desert an old friend under such circumstances. I dare say he found attendance upon the lady more agreeable than a run with the hounds.'

There was a sneer faintly perceptible in the baronet's tone. Dulcie looked from her father to her lover wonderingly, but said not a word.

'I congratulate you on the success of your memorial, Sir Everard,' said Morton.

'You must not call it my memorial. It was as much Sir Nathaniel's as mine, and I understand that even your aunt signed it.'

'But Sir Nathaniel told me it was you who originated the petition. It was you who took that man's position to heart.'

'Perhaps I knew better than any one what a beaten-down whelp the creature was, and how poor a revenge it would be to hang him. I don't believe his death could have been any satisfaction to you, Morton.'

'It would be no satisfaction to me to hang the wrong man,' said Morton, 'if that's what you mean. But it would be an ineffable satisfaction to me to see the right man swing for his crime. I take it that if you hadn't felt serious doubts as to this man's guilt you would not have been so eager to beg him off.'

'That was a question for the jury, and they decided it against him. My only feeling in the matter was that he is a miserable wretch, who scarcely knows the difference between right and wrong, and that his remnant of life might just as well be spared.'

'If you extend your mercy to that class of criminals, you will have occasion to memorialize the Home Secretary every week, for the hangman's chief duty is with that kind of sinner.'

'This man's case came within my ken, and appealed to me in

a peculiar manner. I hope, Morton, you will have the good sense to let this subject drop, and that you will not call upon me to justify myself any farther.'

This was the nearest approach to a coolness of feeling that there had ever been between Sir Everard and his future son-in-law since Morton had first been received at Fairview as Dulcie's accepted suitor.

A look of distress clouded the fair girlish face as Dulcie turned appealingly to her father.

'Don't be offended with Morton, dear papa,' she said gently. 'You know that this is a subject upon which he feels deeply.'

'No doubt. But I think we have had something too much of it. There are some subjects that will not bear to be talked about.'

Here Scroope announced dinner, and closed the conversation. Sir Everard gave his arm to his daughter, and Morton followed to the snug little dining-room, where the round table was bright with flowers and ferns, and quaint Venetian glass, and artistic old silver.

At table the conversation became frivolous, in deference to Scroope and his underling. Sir Everard was for the most part silent, leaving the young people to talk of the things they cared about—the church—the choir—the last penny reading at the school-house—the New Year ball at Highclere—the At Home early in January, for which Mrs. Aspinall had issued cards, with the agreeable announcement, 'Dancing,' in the left-hand corner.

'I suppose Lady Frances will go to the ball at Highclere?' speculated Dulcie.

'I haven't asked her if she is going, but I should think it likely. She is passionately fond of dancing. Why don't you go, Dulcie? I would get tickets for Tiny and Horatia, and my aunt could chaperon you all.'

'Papa does not approve of public balls,' said Dulcie, with a deprecating glance at her father.

'I approve of them immensely in the abstract, as a pleasant impetus to the trade of a quiet little county town, but I don't want to see my daughter spinning round a public assembly-room in the arms of any counterjumper whom the master of the ceremonies may introduce to her.'

'Oh, papa, there is a formidable list of patronesses; tickets only by voucher. There's no possibility of a counterjumper at the Highclere ball.'

'Then there may be something worse than counterjumpers—raffish hunting men, perhaps, who come from Heaven knows where, and get their living Heaven knows how. Any man who

comes to Avonmore with three horses and a servant takes brevet rank as gentleman.'

'Very well,' said Morton 'We will none of us go to the ball. I suppose you have accepted for Mrs. Aspinall's At Home?'

'Yes, papa has no objection to that.'

Dinner was over. Dulcie trifled with a cluster of grapes for five minutes, and then rose to leave the two gentlemen to their claret and conversation. Morton opened the door for her, and gently pressed the little hand that was nearest him as she passed into the hall. Then he went back to the hearth and seated himself opposite Sir Everard, who had wheeled his chair round to the fire. It was a blustrous night, the wind raving and whistling in the tops of the tall poplars, and making the long branches of the cedars creak and groan. A new moon rose high among black, ragged clouds, showing her pale face fitfully through a rent in the darkness.

For some minutes the two men sat by the fire in silence, listening to the wind howling in the wide old chimney, where it seemed to rage more furiously than out of doors. Sir Everard was thoughtful, after his wont; he gazed dreamily at the burning logs, as if in the caverns and gulfs and rugged peaks and promontories of that picturesque fire he could read the story of the past. That settled sadness which had been a part of his character ever since his wife's untimely death hung over him to-night like a cloud.

He looked up suddenly, and saw Morton watching him with grave, intent eyes.

'Why don't you fill your glass, Morton? That La Rose in the jug beside you is too good a wine to be treated so contemptuously.'

'May I give you some first?'

'Do. I feel shivery and out of sorts to-night. The moaning of a wind like that is the most melancholy sound in nature.'

Morton filled the thin, bell-shaped glass before the baronet, but he took no wine himself.

'You said just now, Sir Everard,' he began gravely, 'that there had been something too much said by me about the trial of that man yonder. Yet I think if you consider the matter you will see that an only son—losing a beloved father by a most foul crime when he was just old enough to know and love him and carry his image in his mind to the end of life—could hardly be expected to be temperate in his feelings towards that father's murderer. The lapse of years, which to the outside world may seem to lessen the wickedness of the crime, could have no influence upon the son who in all those years had waited and hoped for the day of retribution. Thus you will perceive on reflection that it is hardly strange I should feel somewhat disap-

pointed at this man's escape, always supposing his story to be true.'

'I am quite able to understand your feeling,' said Sir Everard, 'but I think I should be doing you no kindness were I to encourage a morbid disposition to dwell upon the past. My own life has been so darkened by grief that I would do much to save a young man, in whose welfare I am interested, from the weak indulgence of a vain regret. If you are to be Dulcie's husband you must make her life bright and happy, and to do that you must look forward, and not backward.'

'I hope to be able to do that. I hope to get this cloud out of my brain,' said Morton. 'Sir Everard, may I be frank with you?'

'The franker the better.'

'For the last week—perhaps I had better say ever since the trial—my mind has been distracted by torturing doubts. I have fought in vain against the diabolical suggestions that have forced themselves upon me. And now—now I sit opposite you here—your friend and guest, your future son-in-law, bound by every tie to honour and revere you—the truth must out. My misery of the last fortnight has been caused by the idea that you, once my father's bosom friend, know more of the circumstances of his death than you care to reveal—that you are hiding something from me, that you had some private reason for saving that man's life, that you——'

A passionate burst of sobs stopped his utterance. He turned his back upon Sir Everard and buried his face in the cushion of his chair.

There was silence for some moments, while Morton sat with his face hidden, his whole frame shaken by the violence of his emotion. Sir Everard waited for the storm to pass.

'Morton, I am inexpressibly grieved and distressed at this,' he began calmly, in tones of friendly admonition. 'You have brooded upon this dreadful theme until your mind has lost its balance, and you see all things in a false light. What could I know of your father's murder which all the world that ever heard of that murder does not know? What motive could I have for hiding any knowledge of that kind? I, his friend! What secret alliance can you conceive between me and yonder vagabond? The whole fancy is midsummer madness. I am too sorry for you to be angry; but I warn you that I will marry my daughter to no man who is the victim of a monomania. If you cannot shut this folly out of your mind at once and for ever you are no husband for Dulcie.'

'Dulcie, my darling,' murmured Morton, with his face still hidden in his clasped hands, 'what would I not sacrifice for your sake!'

'She asks no sacrifice from you, nor I for her,' retorted Sir Everard proudly. 'But the man to whom I give her must be sound in heart and mind.'

'Sir Everard, you have been forbearing with me so far,' said Morton, lifting his head, and turning his pale, agitated face towards the baronet. 'Perhaps you will bear with me a little further, and then this painful question may be at rest between us for ever. I have asked questions of others—my aunt and Sir Nathaniel Ritherdon—which I feel it would have been more manly to have asked, in the first instance, of you. I have heard from many people that you and my father were bosom friends, at school, at college, in after life. Was that so?'

'Yes, we were close friends. Yes, he was very dear to me.'

'My aunt told me that at Cambridge you once saved his life, at the risk of your own, when he was seized with cramp in a dangerous part of the river.'

'I would have done the same for any man in the same danger. I was a good swimmer—it was nothing. Do not speak of these things. They are painful to remember.'

'But I must speak of them. I want to understand. And after you left the University you were still friends?'

'Fast friends.'

'So every one tells me,' said Morton, rising and standing face to face with the baronet, who had risen from his chair, and was lounging with his back against the chimney-piece. 'And now, Sir Everard, as you are a gentleman and a man of stainless honour, answer me this question. Were you and my father friends to the hour of his death?'

Everard Courtenay faced him without flinching, the eyelids never quivered over the gray eyes, the firm, thin lips kept their inflexible line under the iron-gray moustache, the dark brows contracted ever so slightly with indignant pride, but that was all.

'We never quarrelled,' he answered coldly.

'But your feelings towards him, your affection for him, your confidence in him? Were those unchanged to the last?'

The gray eyes flashed sudden fire; the face changed with a look of anger that was terrible, titanic almost—the rage of Jove himself, mighty to avenge and destroy.

'Young man, your questions insult my honour, and outrage your father's memory. His good name is the best answer to them. I will not have the past ripped up to satisfy your unreasonable curiosity. I will submit to no cross-examination. You insulted me just now by the expression of doubts so absurd that I could not bring myself to resent them. But now, when you bring your dead father's honour into question, you go a step too far.'

'Forgive me, Sir Everard. I am grieved beyond measure to

offend you, but think how little it is I ask—only to be sure that your love for my father knew no change; that he was your friend to the hour of his death.'

'And if I were to say yes, you would be satisfied. But I deny your right to question me upon a matter of feeling. I have told you that there was never any quarrel between your father and me.'

'Yet I am told that on that last fatal day there was a coolness; your manner to each other was not what it had been.'

'Your informers would have been better sportsmen if they had given their attention to the business in hand instead of watching their neighbours,' answered Sir Everard. 'A fox hunt is hardly a time for the development of friendship. Do people suppose that Mr. Blake and I ought to have ridden shoulder to shoulder all day because we were friends? If I remember rightly, I was riding a fidgety little black mare, which had a rooted objection to poor Blake's big chestnut. That alone would have been a reason for my giving him a wide berth.'

Morton felt a touch of shame at this argument. It reduced Sir Nathaniel's suspicions to nothing, and was a descent from the sublime to the ridiculous. Perhaps all the rest of Morton's suspicions were as baseless—could be answered as easily as this.

'Will you forgive me, Sir Everard?' he said, with a penitent look. 'Will you try to forget all I have said to-night—for Dulcie's sake?'

'I will try—for Dulcie's sake.'

'I think I'll go to the morning-room to join her.'

'Do. I would rather be alone. You have awakened sad memories. You have let loose a fountain of bitter waters.'

'Forgive me,' said Morgan again.

He went to rejoin Dulcie, who was sitting on a low chair, with a funny little work-table before her, and a huge work-basket at her side, making children's frocks for her annual distribution of warm clothing, which was to take place together with all manner of pleasant little ceremonies—snapdragon, and a Christmas-tree for the children, and a copperful of elder wine for the grown-ups—on Christmas Eve. What happiness for Morton to sit beside the industrious little sempstress, to thread her needles with slow, clumsy fingers, and hold her reels of cotton, fondly imagining he was helping and not hindering her!

Sir Everard left the dining-room directly after his guest, and went out through a lobby, where he stopped to put on his slouch hat and fur-lined coat, to the broad terrace in front of the house, where he paced up and down for an hour under the wild sky, watching the driving clouds and the sickly moon, and the black shadows of the cedar boughs drifting along the grass.

The wild night seemed to suit his humour. When he was

tired of the terrace, he wandered about the grounds, across the lawn, round the shrubberied walks, down by the lake, where a swan came out of the darkness and the rushes to hiss at him, angry at the unaccustomed footfall.

Once, from the other side of the lake, in the wildest part of the grounds, he stopped to look back at the house, where the Tudor windows of Dulcie's room, with stained glass in the upper mullions, shone, like the famous windows in Aladdin's palace—as if they had been set with many-coloured gems.

'My star, my delight,' murmured Sir Everard. 'So long as I have you I am happy. And now my mind is made up. My dearest, I may grieve you, but it shall not be for long. A father's love shall make amends for all you lose.'

CHAPTER XXI.

CHRISTMAS AT TANGLEY MANOR.

Dulcie's work was all finished early on Christmas Eve, and everything was ready for the entertainment of her various pensioners, which was to be held in the big official room where Humphrey Vargas had made his confession. The room looked bright and cheery enough to-night, hung with holly and laurel, and furnished with two long tables spread with a sumptuous tea; while on a cross table at the end of the room were laid out the gifts of clothing and other comfortable things, which Dulcie had collected or provided for distribution; cosy cloaks and hoods for the small children, hats and jackets for the big girls; knitted wool waistcoats and comforters for the old men; gowns or petticoats for the old women; packets of tea; tobacco, in smart pouches, deftly made from odds and ends of Dulcie's silk gowns; here and there a bright cap-ribbon to give colour to the mass of warm linsey and duffle, or a scarlet cloak to relieve the grays and browns of the petticoats; taste and thoughtfulness perceptible in everything.

And here was Dulcie, in her black velvet gown, flitting to and fro with cups of tea, and baskets of plum cake, talking to everybody, knowing everybody's name and everybody's domestic affairs, the ages of all the children, the ailments of all who had been ill, the prospects of all who were just going out to service, or beginning life in any way; the griefs of all whose rusty black told of bereavement.

Morton and his two sisters and Lizzie Hardman were working with her. Miss Blake presided over the urn and teapots, and poured out tea and coffee till her arm ached. It was altogether

the happiest, brightest party at which Morton had ever assisted. He forgot all his troubles in the rapture of seeing how Dulcie was beloved, how like a ministering angel she moved hither and thither among the old and young, giving comfort and pleasure to all. People had come from far and near to Dulcie's tea-party. There was no distinction as to parish. All Dora Blake's protégés were invited, as well as Dulcie's own particular people.

There was only one cloud in Dulcie's sky, but that was so dark a shadow she hardly dared think about it, lest she should flag in her efforts to make others happy. Sir Everard had gone to London with his valet, on particular business ; and for the first time since Dulcie had been his housekeeper he was to spend Christmas away from home. This was a big trouble for the loving daughter, who had associated every happiness in life with her father's presence, and to whom life seemed almost a blank when he was absent. She had spoken only the unexaggerated truth when she said that her father would always be first in her mind. No new tie could lessen that which years had woven round her heart, the sacred bond which had grown with her growth, and strengthened with her strength.

'Christmas Day without papa will be too sad,' she told Miss Blake, when she was explaining how some unavoidable piece of business had obliged Sir Everard to go to London.

'My pet, you must spend your Christmas with us,' said Aunt Dora ; 'and it will be very odd if we can't make you happy. Tell your maid to pack your portmanteau, and come home with us this evening, after you've dismissed these good people.'

'I don't know if papa would like me to leave home in his absence,' faltered Dulcie.

'My dearest child, you know he allows you to come to Tangley as often as you like. I'll assume all the responsibility of this visit. You shall have the room opening out of mine, and you shall be my special guest, and the apple of my eye. If Sir Everard wants to scold anybody when he comes home, he shall scold me.'

'I don't think he'll do that,' answered Dulcie, smiling. 'He honours and loves you, and thinks that everything you do is right. So if you really don't mind having me, dear auntie, I should dearly like to come. Next to being with papa it will be happiness to be with you.'

'Then that's settled,' said Miss Blake.

The Christmas-tree was in the servants' hall, a glorious sight for old and young eyes, shining with the light of innumerable coloured tapers, and hung with everything that the heart of man, woman, or child could desire—tobacco-boxes, dolls, nutmeg-graters, babies' socks, toys, cap-ribbons, sweetstuff, tea, coffee, in coloured paper packets, warm gloves, comforters,

oranges, needle-books, rosy apples, silver thimbles, muffatees—a tree out of fairy-land. Everybody got something: and by some legerdemain of Dulcie's everybody seemed to get just the exact article which he or she most ardently desired.

Then they all hurry back to the Justice-room, whence the cups and saucers and long tables have vanished as if by magic, leaving a clear floor for the climax of the evening's enjoyment, Sir Roger de Coverley, danced by old and young, down to the little three-year-olds that can just toddle. A brace of fiddlers, and a young man who thinks he can play the cornet-à-piston, are established in a corner by the fireplace. Negus and hot elder wine, with freshly-filled baskets of plum-cake, are handed round to restore the vital forces which have been exhausted by the feverish excitement of the Christmas-tree. There is a pause of ten minutes or so for refreshments; and then the two fiddlers strike an opening chord, the young man with the cornet gives a feeble blast in a wrong key, and, with a great stamping of feet and a good deal of hard breathing, the dance begins, Dulcie and Morgan leading, Lizzie Hardman bringing up the rear with a waddling three-year-old in a Rob Roy frock and socks to correspond. Tiny and Horatia prefer to stand and look on, but Aunt Dora is dancing arduously, her partner a gigantic waggoner in a gorgeously-braided smock frock and brown leather leggings.

Sir Roger lasts about three-quarters of an hour, and after more negus and elder wine the happy guests depart, but not till they have deafened everybody with three loud cheers in honour of Dulcie.

'Give it mouth, boys,' cries the huge waggoner, waving his mighty arm; 'another and another, boys, and a little one in for Miss Blake and the other ladies.'

Then, with much scraping of feet and ducking of heads in the doorway, Dulcie's Christmas visitors take their leave, and there is more noise of merry voices and glad laughter in the village of Austhorpe as they go their homeward way than will be heard again on this side of harvest home.

Christmas Day at Tangley was not altogether sad for Dulcie, even though, as she told Aunt Dora with her eyes full of tears, it was the first Christmas Day she had spent away from her father since she was eight years old. Everybody conspired to make her forget this woful fact. She drove with Morton and the girls to the old parish church at Highclere, for morning service, and the solemn cathedral chants, the fine old organ, thrilled and delighted her. The service seemed as splendid to Dulcie as all the glories of Westminster Abbey would appear to a more experienced church-goer: so striking was the contrast to the village choir and feeble harmonium at Austhorpe. After morning church they drove through the wintry woods, lightly

powdered with rime, to Blatchmardean Castle, to see if Lady Frances Grange were any the worse for her ducking in Twamley brook, and the Earl insisted that they should stay to luncheon.

'Provided you can all eat cold mutton,' he said cheerily. 'I know there was a haunch for dinner last night, and I dare say it will appear at luncheon. It was off one of my finest ewes, and I think a slice of cold roast mutton with a little hot pickle is not half a bad thing.'

There were curry and a chicken pie, as well as the cold haunch, and the luncheon party was altogether as pleasant and cheerful as it could be—with all the charm of an unpremeditated entertainment. Everybody talked of his or her favourite subject. Lord Blatchmardean had a great deal to tell Morton about his latest experiments in feeding sheep—the wonderful success of which was to be perceived in the flavour of the cold haunch. Frances told Tiny her mortifying experiences of the other day, and expatiated on Morton's goodness in sacrificing his own sport for her comfort. Lord Beville sat next Dulcie, and had a great deal to say to her—as he always had when they met, seeming intensely interested in everything which interested her—even to the most feminine trivialities.

'Why don't you drive over to see my sister sometimes?' he asked. 'You say you would like to play billiards as well as she does. There's our table at your service; and Fan or I would only be too delighted to give you a lesson. She's one of the best players in Daleshire, don't you know?'

'So Morton has told me,' said Dulcie, smiling at his fervid good-nature. 'It's very kind of you to make such an offer, but I really don't know that I have any ambition about billiards. I have felt rather humiliated sometimes when people have asked me to join in a game, and I have been obliged to confess that I hardly know how to handle a cue. But I don't think I should ever be able to devote much time to billiards. We have no table at home; and I can't bear to be often away from my father.'

'And yet you will leave him altogether before long,' said Beville, looking more serious than the nature of the conversation might seem to warrant. 'Is not that rather inconsistent?'

'I suppose it is,' faltered Dulcie; 'but even when I am married I hope to spend at least half my life with my father. Tangley is not far from Fairview. I shall still be able to take care of papa, and he will be with us at the Manor House a great deal, I hope.'

'Sir Everard and Morton get on very well together, I suppose,' speculated Beville.

'Morton is devoted to my father.'

'And your father likes him?'

'Oh yes, as much as I think papa would ever like any young man. You see, my dearest father has lived a lonely life since he

lost my mother. He has lived with his books, not caring much for society, not interesting himself in politics, or in the outside world. Now Morton is all energy and activity of mind, deeply interested in the questions of the day.'

'I understand—a man of action, while your father is a man of thought. No; there cannot be much sympathy between them,' said Lord Beville decidedly, as if he were glad to have the question settled. 'Morton is going into Parliament, I hear.'

'I hope so.'

'Then you will have to spend nearly half of every year in London, and that will separate you and Sir Everard.'

'I hope papa may go to London with us. Why do you try to make me unhappy, Lord Beville?'

'Could I be so diabolical as to do that? I think not. But you remember the story of the fox who had lost his tail?'

'Yes, he wanted all the other foxes to cut off their tails!'

'Precisely. That is human nature as well as vulpine nature. Suppose now that I were very unhappy myself?'

'I should be sorry to suppose that,' answered Dulcie, smiling at him as if the suggestion were a joke; 'but even if you were, I don't think you would be so unkind as to wish to make me unhappy too.'

'Don't be too sure of that. You don't know what evil moods I am subject to sometimes.'

Morton had got himself released from Lord Blatchmardean and the agricultural question by this time, and, luncheon being ended, he was able to come round to Dulcie's side of the table, having wondered very much what Beville and his betrothed had been talking about so seriously. But before he could say a word to Dulcie Lady Frances carried her off to the stables to feed the horses with the fragments of the feast, in the shape of bread and apples.

'That's the way all my ribstones and russets go,' remonstrated the Earl, who was almost as proud of his apples as of his sheep.

Clementine asked Lady Frances and her brother to drive over to Tangley in the evening with Miss Moulton, to join in some Christmas games, provided the Earl would not mind being left alone on the festive occasion; to which Lord Blatchmardean replied cheerily that he was never less alone than when alone, adding, rather inconsistently, that he would have his steward in to talk over the latest farming operations.

'That fellow MacTaggart is always up to his eyes in work,' he said. 'He quite snubs me if I stop him in the fields of a morning to ask him how things are going on; but I dare say over a glass of toddy he will be more communicative.'

So the young people being free to accept Clementine's invita-

tion it was settled they were to drive over early in the evening. The Tangley dinner was to be at five o'clock, to give the servants a long evening for snap-dragon and mistletoe; whereby Aunt Dora and the young people were ready for their guests at seven, and all the jardinières and coffee-tables were wheeled away from the centre of the floor, leaving room and verge enough for such juvenile sports as Tiny and Lizzie Hardman delighted in, and the grave Horatia blandly tolerated.

Beville and Frances were tremendously strong at these festal games, suggesting many new ideas, starting dumb charades, and speaking charades, comic tableaux vivants, a goose game, and a dancing-bear game, and a huntsman's game, and a sneezing game, and all manner of ridiculous diversions, in which Miss Moulton and Aunt Dora assisted with exemplary good-humour. Then on the edge of midnight Tiny asked Lizzie Hardman to play a waltz, a request with which that young person immediately complied, playing the Blue Danube with such swing and perfect accent that before they had time to think about it Dulcie and Beville were floating along a stream of melody, in dream-like revolutions, smooth as leaves gliding down a swift-running river. Morton stood looking on for a minute or so, admiring the pose of Dulcie's slender figure, the grace of the bright girlish head. He might have stood and gazed thus till the dance had ended perhaps had it not been for Lady Frances.

'Well,' she said, looking at him with a smile of bewitching impertinence, 'has that melody no inspiration for you?'

'It inspires me to solicit the privilege of a waltz with you,' answered Morton promptly, and in the next minute they were revolving with the other pair.

Frances Grange was an exquisite waltzer. It was one of her rare accomplishments—it was a natural gift. She had won the enthusiastic praises of the famous Madame Adelaide, whose pupil she had been for one brief course of lessons when she was in London for her first season, under Lady Luffington's wing.

'That girl is a born dancer,' cried Madame Adelaide. 'You others crawl about like beetles, spiders, all that there is of the most ignoble. This one can dance—it is the poetry of motion. Go then, little cat, you want none of my lessons. You dance like daffodils, or running waters. It is the good God who has taught thee.'

To waltz with Frances was to forget for the moment that there was any other girl in existence, or that life held any higher delight than circling dreamily to a drawling German melody.

'Are you tired?' asked Morton, when they had out-waltzed the other two for about five minutes.

'I don't know what it means to be tired of waltzing: but perhaps Miss Hardman is tired of playing.'

They were near enough to the piano for Lizzie to hear the suggestion.

'Not in the least,' she said, changing to the Manola, with its languid sweetness, and ground-swell of passion.

Lord Beville started again, this time with Clementine, while Dulcie seated herself by the piano, where she could talk to Lizzie Hardman.

Lizzie's honest gray eyes were following those two dancers in whom she was most interested, Morton and Lady Frances. She and Morton had danced many a waltz together on summer evenings, when all the windows were open to the cool, sweet night, and the vesper carol of thrush or blackbird mingled with the music of the waltz. But these had been evenings when there was no one else for Morton to dance with except his sisters ; and he had a theory that neither Tiny's nor Horatia's step corresponded with his. To-night Lizzie was out of it all : and it seemed to her, as she sat at the piano, that her mission in life was to pipe to other people's dancing.

Lord Beville and Clementine began to flag presently, and they both dropped into seats near Dulcie, in the snug corner behind the piano.

'How well Morton and Fan step together!' said Beville, speaking of the dancers as if they were horses, 'but that's only natural. Fan broke him in.'

Dulcie looked puzzled.

'She taught him to waltz—it was about the only accomplishment she could teach him. They used to practise in the great saloon at Blatchmardean, to the terror of all the rats and mice behind the panelling.'

'Your sister waltzes exquisitely,' said Dulcie, looking on with a faint thrill of jealousy as Morton and Frances floated down the room, circling perpetually, like phantom dancers in a German legend.

'Good mover! Picks up her feet nicely, doesn't she?' said Beville, with his horsey air.

Lizzie struck a sudden crashing chord, and the waltzers stopped in a startled way, like mechanical figures whose machinery had gone wrong.

'I thought you were going on for ever, Morton,' she said.

'I beg your pardon, Lizzie, upon my word it was too bad,' answered Morton, 'but I could not allow Lady Frances to crow over me, though she was my instructor in the art of waltzing.'

'You never told me that before,' said Dulcie presently, when she and Morton had strayed into a conservatory all abloom with snowdrops and Parma violets, Christmas roses, and lilies of the valley.

'Never told you what, dearest?'

'That Lady Frances taught you to waltz.'

'What a terrible omission!' he exclaimed, smiling down at her, as she stood trifling with the long leaves of a cluster of lilies of the valley. 'Why, dear child, Fanny Grange and I have been like brother and sister for the last ten years. She taught me to waltz; and I'm afraid she taught me to ride, for I know I was a tremendous muff in the hunting-field till she took me under her wing.'

'I wonder——' faltered Dulcie.

'What do you wonder, my loveliest?'

'Why you did not fall in love with Lady Frances instead of with me.'

'That's a curious question, and I can only give you the answer Tom Jones gave his mistress.'

'What was that?'

'Look in the glass, Dulcie, and you will see why I love you better than any one else in the world; why I never can be inconstant to you.'

'Only for that, Morton! only for some fancied prettiness you can see in me more than in other people! That is such a poor reason. Disease or affliction might change me to-morrow.'

'But the change would not alter my love, Dulcie. It was born of your beauty, but it has grown up in my heart now, and is a part of my nature. Nothing can lessen it.'

'I like to believe you,' answered Dulcie softly, looking up at him with innocent blue eyes, beaming purest love.

CHAPTER XXII.

'TO THE END OF THE WORLD.'

DULCIE went back to Fairview directly after an early breakfast next day. Her father had promised to return to-day, and no argument could prevail upon her to linger for another hour at Tangley, albeit Morton and his sisters represented to her that Sir Everard could not possibly be at home till the afternoon.

'I am not sure of that,' said Dulcie; 'he may have travelled by a night train.'

'He would hardly do that unless there were some urgency in the case,' argued Aunt Dora.

'Isn't it urgent for him to come back to *me?*' cried Dulcie indignantly. 'Does he not know that I am miserable without him? Oh, dear auntie, I beg ten thousand pardons,' she exclaimed, conscious of having been rude to her hostess, 'you know how happy you have made me here; but I could not exist much longer without my father. Nothing could fill that blank.'

Morton looked grave.

'If this girl were called upon to choose between her father and me, I know which of us would go by the board,' he said to himself.

Dulcie's pony carriage was at the door at nine o'clock. She had given particular orders about it when she left home on Christmas Eve. She was ready dressed in her fur jacket and hat. Her portmanteau had been brought down. There was a great deal of kissing to be gone through with Aunt Dora and the three girls, Lizzie Hardman coming in for an honest share of the kisses, though she was only a penniless dependant; and then Dulcie pulled on her fur driving gloves, and ran off to the carriage.

'I suppose I may be permitted to drive home with you,' said Morton, taking the seat by her side; and away went the ponies, at a sharp trot, along the frost-bound road.

Morton was dismissed at the door of Fairview, after a delightful twenty minutes' drive through the crisp wintry air.

'Mayn't I come in and play a game of chess with you?' he asked, lingering on the threshold.

'Chess at half-past nine in the morning!' exclaimed Dulcie. 'Ridiculous! I am going to be desperately busy.'

'Don't you know that this is Boxing Day, and a general holiday?'

'Yes, for poor people who work hard all the year round, and who want an appointed day now and then to get tipsy upon. I have a hundred things to do. Besides, papa may come home at any moment, and he may be tired, or he may want to be alone.'

'I see,' said Morton, rather moodily. 'I count for nothing when your father is in question. Well, I suppose I may come in the evening?'

'Yes, dear. Papa will have rested by that time, and will be charmed to see you.'

'I don't know much about that; but if you are charmed, that is enough for me.'

So they kissed and parted, and Dulcie ran off to her household duties, which were light but numerous.

She ransacked all the greenhouses and adorned the rooms in which her father lived with freshest ferns and flowers, gay smiling blossoms which should seem to welcome him home. She was very exact in her orders about the dinner, and had a consultation with Scroope as to which particular hock and claret should be brought up from the cellar for this evening's consumption.

'Your master will be tired after his journey,' she said. 'He must have something especially good.'

When all these duties had been performed there was still a

great deal of the day to be got rid of, and the hours seemed all the longer because of that eager expectation of her father's momentary return, which kept Dulcie on the alert for every sound of wheels on the road outside Fairview. Sometimes she seated herself at the piano with the intention of practising for a couple of hours at a stretch ; but in the middle of a dreamy nocturne her thoughts wandered off, her hands dropped listlessly from the keys, and she went to the window to look across the rise and fall of lawn and shrubberies to one distant point at which, through a break in the trees, she could see any vehicle passing along the road.

'I wonder why papa went to town so suddenly,' she thought, over and over again ; 'and why he did not tell me what his business was about.'

So the day wore heavily on, and then came twilight, and the quaint little tea-table was set out in front of the fire ; and then, just as Dulcie was growing tearful at the thought that this pleasantest hour of all the winter day was going to slip past without bringing her father, the welcome sound of wheels was heard in the avenue, and she ran out bareheaded to greet the traveller.

The coachman pulled up his horse at sight of the fair head, with wind-tossed hair, and Sir Everard got out of the brougham within fifty yards of the house. Dulcie slipped her arm through his, and walked by his side to the hall.

Even in that dim light she could see that he looked haggard and worn.

'Dear father, how tired you must be!' she murmured, in soothing tones.

'Yes, I am a little tired, and I have been a good deal worried.'

'Come to your nest by the fire, dearest, and let me give you some tea.'

'A woman's panacea. If it would only cure all our ills!' said Sir Everard. 'If it were like the water of Lethe, now, Dulcie, and could give us everlasting forgetfulness!'

They were in the morning-room by this time, in the cheerful glow of the fire, Dulcie helping her father to take off his fur-lined coat.

'Dear father,' she exclaimed, 'you would not like to forget everything?'

'Everything, Dulcie, just for the sake of forgetting one thing,' answered Sir Everard wearily. 'But no,' he went on in a lighter tone, 'I should not like to forget my sweet young daughter, and all her goodness to me.'

'Goodness?' questioned Dulcie ; 'you mean gratitude, papa. And now tell me all about this London business. Was it very tiresome?'

'It was worse than tiresome, Dulcie,' he answered gravely, 'for I fear that it will grieve you. But we'll talk about it presently. Give me my cup of tea, and tell me how you amused yourself while I was away.'

Dulcie hereupon busied herself about her teapot, while she gave her father a brief sketch of what had happened during his absence.

'I had no idea Morton and Lady Frances Grange were such friends,' she said, when she had told him about the impromptu dance.

'Nor I, till the other day,' answered Sir Everard.

'Don't you think her very pretty?' asked Dulcie thoughtfully.

'I should call her distinguished-looking, rather than pretty. There is an originality about her, a fascinating audacity. I can quite understand any young man falling in love with her. Indeed, I wonder she has not made a good match before now.'

'It is strange, is it not, papa?' said Dulcie, with an unconscious sigh. 'Perhaps there is some one whom she likes very much, but who does not care for her?'

'Perhaps. A question of that kind offers an illimitable field for speculation.'

'And now, dear father, about this London business? Why should it grieve me? I don't think it can, so long as it has nothing to do with you.'

'My dearest, unfortunately this has to do with me.'

Dulcie looked at him earnestly, her delicate bloom paling a little.

'It is the loss of money, then,' she said. 'You have had some misfortune. We are going to be poor. Oh, dearest father, that won't grieve me, so long as I can make you happy, so long as I can comfort you.'

'No, Dulcie, it is no money loss which troubles me. I think both you and I could bear that. The Fates do not touch us there.'

'What is it then, papa?'

She was on her knees beside his chair, her loving hands clasping his, the firelight shining on her pale, eager face, her tender blue eyes, and parted lips.

'Darling, I think you know that for a longish time, though I have made light of it always, I have not been very strong, or altogether in good health.'

The pale cheeks grew deathly white, the light died out of the widening gaze.

'Father! father!' she cried, with a choking sob.

'For a long time—certainly for the last three years—I have felt that my prime of life was over. I have lost all pleasure in active exercise, and anything in the shape of exertion has become

a fatigue to me. For a long time—for more than three years—it has been in my mind that there was something organically wrong, and that I ought to consult some authority in the particular kind of disorder with which I believed myself affected.'

'Yes,' said Dulcie breathlessly, her eyes fixed on her father's face.

'The other day I had an attack of my old chronic pain in the side. It was a little sharper than usual, and it told me the time had come when I must face the inevitable. If this thing was to be fatal, it was best I should know it.'

'Father!'

It was a cry of despair which came from her, in spite of herself—a wild appeal to him with outstretched hands and shrinking figure—warding off the horror he was going to tell: as if it had been some dreadful engine that was slowly bearing down upon her to crush her to death, and she saw the doom, and could not escape it.

'My dearest, this thing must come to us all in our time, in some form or other. The same dark night awaits all. We must all tread the same path. At its worst it means death, and—my darling, don't look at me with those agonized eyes—for me the doom may approach slowly, gently. We may have years to spend together yet.'

'Father, will you tell me the truth quite plainly? You saw a doctor in London?'

'Yes, one of the greatest men in that big city.'

'And he told you that you have a fatal disease?'

'He only confirmed my own suspicion. Heart and lungs are both affected, and have been for a long time. My life cannot be a long one; but the thread may be spun a little longer yet, in spite of the Fates, if I am careful.'

'We will be careful,' cried Dulcie; 'we will be so careful that a few months hence when you go to the physician he will tell you there is nothing the matter—your daughter's care has cured you. What are we to do, dear father? tell me everything.'

'I fear you will hardly care to assist in my cure, Dulcie, when you know the conditions attaching to it.'

'What are they?'

'First and foremost, I am never again to spend a winter in England, unless I am resigned to spend the latter half of it in my grave. Dr. Randal recommends me to start at once for the south of France, possibly to cross to Algiers.'

'Yes, papa. When are we to go? To-morrow?'

'Think, Dulcie! It is a long way from Morton. Will you go with me?'

'To the end of the world,' she answered, hiding her tears upon his breast.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN MR. TOMPLIN'S CHAMBERS.

Boxing Day was over, and the industrious classes were straggling back to the work-a-day world with its dull round of labour, feeling slightly the worse in health and spirits, and considerably the worse in pocket, for the Christmas holidays. London, with its surrounding belt of dingy suburbs, wore its dullest aspect as Jane Barnard, seated in a corner of a third-class carriage, surveyed this almost unknown world with curious eyes which let nothing escape them.

'I don't see much to boast of in the old country,' she said to herself, as she looked across a shabby wilderness of roofs and chimneys, broken here and there by some tall shaft which vomited clouds of black smoke that made a darkness in the air. The narrow streets; the straggling neighbourhoods badly begun, and never to be finished; the dirty window-curtains in smoky windows; the littered pens at the back of the houses, which had been intended for gardens; all these seemed to the eye of Jane Barnard unspeakably hideous. The rural beauty of Daleshire had appeared small and mean in contrast with the broad rivers and mighty hills of her adopted country; but these London outskirts were uglier than anything she had ever seen, and she pitied the people who had to live in these squalid homes, under this dull smoke-curtained sky.

Mrs. Barnard had left Highclere by the earliest train, and hoped to return there at night. She had brought a hand-bag containing her night-gear, in case of being obliged to stay in London, being altogether a provident and practical little woman. She had a quiet courage and resolution which enabled her to face difficulties that would have daunted a weaker spirit. A stranger in London, ignorant of the ways of the town, without a friend to help her, she set about her work as calmly and as briskly as if the business that lay before her were the easiest thing in the world.

She found herself landed in Euston Square, and she had to make her way to the Temple. She was chary of spending money, and she was an excellent walker, so finding, on inquiry from a policeman, that her destination was within two miles, she walked off through the streets and squares, Strand-wards, looking about her as she went, with those bright, penetrating eyes of hers, but never pausing on her way, save to make an inquiry where the route appeared doubtful.

This part of London struck her as more agreeable. The streets and squares had a respectable, old-established air. Everything was dingy and smoke-dried; but here there were shining win-

dows, and newly whitened stoops, as Mrs. Barnard called the doorsteps. Here there were, at least, prosperity and cleanliness, though the brightness and blue sky of America were missing.

But by-and-by, when Jane Barnard found herself in the Temple, just as St. Dunstan's clock was chiming noon, she looked about her almost awe-stricken by the ancient air of the place—the old church, the old hall, the grave old Queen Anne houses, the fountain, the distant glimpse of garden and river. This was a kind of thing neither New York nor Boston could show. This was the growth of centuries, a page out of history, printed in brick and stone; and Mrs. Barnard began to feel proud of the mother country.

She found her way to Elm Court, and, painted on the jamb of one of the doors, discovered the name she wanted—Fourth floor —Mr. Tomplin—Mr. Green—Mr. Collander.

'I only hope I shall find him at home,' she said to herself.

The fourth floor seemed a long way towards the skies; for the stairs were bad, and the ascent laborious; but the little woman tripped up the four double flights lightly and briskly, and gave a sigh of relief as she drew breath before Mr. Tomplin's door—a black door, with Mr. Tomplin's name painted upon it in white letters.

'Come in,' said a voice, in answer to her knock, and on opening the door she found herself face to face with a gentleman who was eating his breakfast at a table loaded and littered with papers and books of all kinds.

There was only the smallest pretence of a lobby or passage between the outer door and this sanctum of law and domesticity; but Mr. Tomplin did not seem abashed at being discovered breakfasting, though the hour was late and the whole thing had adissipated air. He seemed a little surprised at the sex of his visitor, and that was all.

'Come in, if you please,' he said, rising to receive her, 'and take a chair by the fire. Cold morning, isn't it? I'm afraid you'll find the room smell of bacon,' he said apologetically, with a glance at the Dutch oven in the fender. 'I've just been toasting some. Shall I open the window?'

'Not on my account, if you please, sir. I am very sorry to have disturbed you at your breakfast.'

'Don't mention it. I ought not to be breakfasting so late, but the fact is, I was at a dance last night. They called it "small and early," but that's a matter of opinion. There were nearly a hundred people, and the dancing went on till four o clock this morning.'

'I'm afraid, sir, that I have taken a great liberty in calling upon you,' began Mrs. Barnard, in a low, serious voice. 'I feel that I have no right to come here, except the right which one

human being in distress has to ask for help from another. I am the daughter of that wretched man whom you defended at Highclere Assizes, and in whose innocence you believed when everybody else was against him.'

Mr. Tomplin smiled as he dropped a lump of sugar into his coffee. 'My dear soul,' he said, in a pleasant, friendly way, 'I am heartily glad your father's sentence has been commuted, if it were only for your sake. But why do you suppose I am a believer in his innocence?'

'You defended him, sir,' answered Jane naïvely.

'My dear madam, I should have defended the most double-dyed villain that ever figured in the Newgate Calendar. That is my profession. However, in this case I was certainly inclined to believe your father's story, incredible as it seemed that a man who had only committed a robbery should plead guilty to a murder. The man's manner impressed me. It was just conceivable to me that there might be a state of mind in which a man would thrust his neck into the public halter rather than string himself up with a rope of his own purchasing—a state of mind akin to lunacy, but just short of it. A queer case altogether it seemed, and I tried to do my best with it; particularly as it was the first murder case in which I was ever concerned, and I naturally felt interested in it,' added Mr. Tomplin cheerfully, as he stirred his coffee.

'You spoke nobly, sir, and like a man who had knowledge of the truth. I think you must know who the real murderer was,' said Jane Barnard, 'though perhaps you did not know enough to accuse him openly. In your examination of Sir Everard Courtenay it was evident you had some secret knowledge. I was told by a man who was in the court that day that Sir Everard turned deadly pale when you questioned him.'

'He did not relish my allusion to his wife. That was a random shot which seemed to hit the bull's-eye,' replied Mr. Tomplin lightly, as he eat his bacon and dry toast

'But you must have had some knowledge, sir, which prompted that question?' urged Jane Barnard.

'Very little. My brief was almost a blank. I saw your father, and he could tell me nothing except that he found Mr. Blake's body in a ditch, saw the glimmer of his watch-chain, took watch and chain, and emptied the dead man's pockets. This occurred after dusk, between six and seven o'clock, as your father believes. I had hardly an idea as to what line of defence to take the afternoon before the trial, but in the coffee-room at the "Peacock" that evening I fell in with a talkative local doctor—a Mr. Jebb I think he was called—who had a great deal to say about the Blake murder, chiefly by insinuation and innuendo. It was he who suggested that Blake might have had an

enemy—that there might have been jealousy. I had the greatest difficulty in getting at what he meant, for although the man wanted to talk he was desperately afraid of committing himself; but at last I got at the fact that Blake had been in love with Lady Courtenay, when she was Miss Rothney, and that it was just possible Sir Everard might have been jealous of him. "Did you ever hear that he was jealous?" I asked. "Did it ever come to your knowledge that there were any unpleasant scenes, or any quarrel between Sir Everard and Blake?" "Never," says this Jebb. "I attended Lady Courtenay in her last illness, and I can vouch for it that Sir Everard was a devoted husband." "And you never knew of any quarrel between him and Blake?" I asked. "Never," says he. "Then, my dear fellow," says I, "all your insinuations end in smoke." Mr. Jebb just shrugs his shoulders and smiles blandly. "A man must talk about something," he says, "he can't be dumb. That's the distinction between him and the brute creation." I felt inclined to tell the man he was a humbug; but I made use of his suggestion, vague as it was, and fired my random shots, which, as you say, seem to have hit rather hard."

'And you know nothing of the real murderer?'

'Nothing. And, my dear madam, why worry yourself about the matter any further? Your father's sentence has been commuted The penalty he now suffers is no more than would have been the natural punishment of the robbery of which he freely admits his guilt. He has no ground for complaint.'

'No,' she answered. 'He is satisfied, poor soul. I don't think he will have to bear his punishment very long. But I have four children in America, Mr. Tomplin, whose father is one of the best and truest men that ever lived Are my sons and daughters to be told by-and-by that their grandfather was a murderer? Is my good husband to bear such a stigma as that upon his wife's name? All our friends in Boston know my maiden name. They will all have read about the trial at Highclere. I have come from America to clear my father's name, if I can.'

'I fear you have come upon a useless errand,' answered the barrister kindly. 'The question of Mr. Blake's murder has been set at rest for ever by your father's trial and condemnation. A jury has found him guilty. The commutation of the sentence is merely an act of mercy upon the part of the Crown.'

'But if it could be proved that another man committed the murder—if another man could be brought to confess his guilt——?'

'There is a great deal in such an if as that,' replied Mr. Tomplin, smiling at her earnestness.

'And you cannot help me in any way, sir? You can give me no hint—no clue?'

'Unfortunately, none. I am sorry you have had your journey for nothing.'

'Hardly that, sir. It is something to learn how little you knew when you cross-examined Sir Everard Courtenay, because you see, sir, I had been building my hopes on a rotten foundation. But there must have been something in his mind, or he would not have flinched at your questions.'

'I don't know that. A man might be sensitive about his dead wife's name. I felt myself a ruffian and a cad while I asked those questions; but it was necessary to do something. I hope you believe that I did my best for your father.'

'I am sure of that, sir. I thank you for having received me so kindly. Good-day.'

'Good-day to you, and I wish your project were a more hopeful one,' answered Mr. Tomplin.

Mrs. Barnard left him as quietly as she had entered. She walked back to the station, finding her way easily enough this time, had a little over an hour to wait for a train, and was back at Highclere soon after dusk.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ON THE WING.

Morton's surprise at hearing that Sir Everard and his daughter were on the point of starting for the South was as great as it was unpleasant. His first impulse when Dulcie told him where she was going was to go with her, but Sir Everard interfered.

'Not for the world, my dear Morton,' he said; 'your prospects must not be blighted because I have a weak chest. The Highclere election will be on early in February, and you have made up your mind to stand. You will have plenty of work to do in the meantime if you want to get in; for from all I hear there will be a pretty sharp contest on the Liberal side, and you, as a new man, will have to fight your hardest. No, Morton, you look after your political interests while Dulcie and I ramble along the Riviera and cross over to Algiers for a quiet month or so among the Moors. We shall be back, if all go well, with the swallows.'

'That is a long time for me to look forward to, sir,' answered Morton, pale and grave, with a glance of mournful tenderness at Dulcie, who stood by her father's side, her hand clasped in her lover's, her heart aching with a divided love. 'How am I to live without Dulcie all through three dreary months?'

'You managed to exist without her a good many years,' said the baronet, with a touch of cynicism.

'Because I did not know the world contained such a pearl; but knowing her, having won her, how am I to bear my life without her? Let me give up this election and come with you, Sir Everard. It will be like a foretaste of our honeymoon.'

'Such joys should never be anticipated. I have admired and sympathized with your ambition, Morton. It places you apart from and above the ruck of young men. I should despise you if you could surrender your hopes so lightly, and I think before you had been away from England a week you would despise yourself.'

'If I did I should at least be happy.'

'No, Morton; self-contempt and happiness are incompatible. You would be wretched.'

'You must not come with us, Morton; indeed you must not,' said Dulcie. 'I should hate myself if for my sake you sacrificed your noble ambition.'

She looked at him with fond, admiring eyes, as if he were a hero and a martyr—as if, until he arose with the desire to legislate for his country, nobody had ever hoped, or cared, or striven for the welfare of mankind.

So, after some further argument, it was decided that Morton was only to go with the travellers as far as Paris, and that he was to spend the next month in preparing the ground for his election. The day after Sir Everard's return from London was Saturday, and it was on Sunday evening that this conversation took place, as father and daughter sat by the fire in Dulcie's morning-room, with Morton in his accustomed seat on the opposite side of the hearth. He had come over to Fairview directly after dinner, leaving his womankind to drive to evening service at Highclere. They were tremendous church-goers, and never missed a service that they could manage to attend.

The lovers parted mournfully that evening, between ten and eleven, in the windy avenue, Dulcie having wrapped herself in her cloak, at Morton's request, and accompanied him as far as the gate.

'How little I thought this was hanging over me when we were so happy together on Christmas night!' said Morton discontentedly.

'When we were so happy,' echoed Dulcie, pouting a little. 'You mean when you and Lady Frances Grange were so happy together. I was not honoured with much of your society.'

'Dulcie, can you be jealous?' cried Morton, amazed.

'I think I could if I tried very hard,' faltered Dulcie.

'My darling, such a thought is unworthy of you. As for poor little Fan,' he went on, speaking of Lady Frances as if she

were a favourite dog, 'she and I have a kind of adopted sister-and-brotherhood which is more familiar than friendship. She trusts me wholly, as I trust her, and she knows that there is only one woman in the world I love, or ever can love. But don't let us waste the precious moments talking nonsense, Dulcie. I want to know more about this sudden indisposition of your father.'

'It is not sudden, Morton. Poor papa has been suffering at intervals for years. He would not tell me anything about it for fear he should grieve me, but careful as he has been to hide his pain from me, I know that he has suffered. He has had days of extreme depression; sleepless nights. I have been watchful of him, and have felt many a pang of fear, but I have tried to hide my anxiety. And now the London doctor has told him that he has a mortal malady. His life can only be prolonged by extreme care. Can you blame me, Morton, if I wish to do all that love can do to cherish and comfort him?'

'No, dearest, I cannot blame you; but I wish you were my wife.'

'Why?'

'Because in that case either I should go with you, or you would not go at all.'

'But you are going with us as far as Paris.'

'A fig for Paris. What is that beggarly stage of the journey? Four-and-twenty hours at most, and stretched to that only by dawdling a little at the Lord Warden. It is a contemptible boon to be allowed to escort you to Paris.'

'If you are disagreeable you shall stay at Tangley.'

The church clock struck eleven, and they parted, half in playfulness and half in sorrow. The travellers were to start early the following afternoon by the Highclere express. Dulcie devoted the morning to wandering about the house, looking fondly at those home treasures she was to leave for a time. Then she went to her own room, and put in order drawers and wardrobes which had been disordered in the hurry of packing. Her maid had had as much as she could do to get everything ready in time for this sudden journey. She and Sir Everard's valet were to accompany the travellers. Nothing could be more marked than the contrast between the two servants, Emma Pew, a simple-minded ruddy-cheeked rustic, and Stanton, a man of the world, a soldier of fortune, speaking half a dozen Continental languages, as much at home in any corner of Europe as at Austhorpe, ready for any adventure. To him the idea of starting for Algeria was delight, to Emma it was a source of fear and dread. Some one had officiously informed her that Algiers was on the coast of Africa, and the very name of the dark continent had inspired horror and aversion.

'Isn't Africa a dreadful place, Mr. Stanton?' she asked, 'a

savage sandy country, where there's nothing but poisonous swamps, and niggers, and lions climbing up trees—or perhaps it is the travellers that climb to get out of the way of the lions.'

'Oh, Algiers isn't half a bad place,' answered Stanton, in his easy way; 'capital climate, fine sea, picturesque costumes, decent hotels; and as to lions—well, yes, I dare say we might have a chance of seeing a lion hunt.'

This was enough for Emma Pew. From this moment lions roamed up and down the streets of Algiers in the fancy picture of that city which her distempered imagination set before her.

And now Emma had done her work, and all Dulcie's belongings were packed and in the hall ready to be carried off to the station; and, having done her duty, Miss Pew, much disturbed and excited by the journey before her, had gone off to employ her last leisure hours in Daleshire in taking leave of her parents, aunts, uncles, sisters, and cousins. Thus Dulcie was left alone in rooms which already had a deserted look.

Her bedroom was the same which her mother had occupied in her brief span of married life, a lovely room with wide square windows overlooking the lawns and shrubberies, the low-lying lake and the wide expanse of landscape beyond. At one end of the room there was an oriel, fronting south, and in this sunny window was Dulcie's favourite seat. Here she had a little table with an easel; here she painted flowers or fruit with a delicacy of touch and tone rare in an amateur hand; here she worked, or read, or wrote, through many a busy morning. It was the room in which she had been born, in which her mother had died. Sir Everard had removed himself to the furthest end of the house after his wife's death, and had never since that hour entered this room save once when Dulcie was ill. But for Dulcie there was no terror in this chamber where death had come—where the young and lovely wife had lain in her last slumber. It was hallowed rather by that sad memory. She loved to look at the objects on which her mother's eye had rested, to sit in the low tapestried arm-chair which had been her mother's favourite seat, to handle the old china cups and saucers on the mantelpiece, the duodecimo volumes of classic prose and poetry on the hanging bookshelves by the bed, knowing that her mother's touch had rested on them.

To-day she moved slowly about the room, looking wistfully at familiar objects, wondering idly when she would see them again. Presently she paused, half in absence of mind, before an old Japanese cabinet, and began to pull out the drawers one by one, looking listlessly at their contents. In one she saw a few old letters of her own, notes of invitation, programmes of concerts at Highclere, rubbish of all kinds; in another there were shells, in another some withered flowers gathered a year or two

ago in her Alpine rambles, in another worn-out paint-brushes, and half-empty colour-tubes. Another, and this she handled reverently, had been undisturbed since her mother's death. She had laid a folded sheet of tissue-paper over the contents, trifling as they were, the mere jetsam and flotsam of daily life. To-day, in sheer idleness of mind, she lifted the paper, and began to rearrange the trifles which her loving hands had carefully covered years ago, when first she took possession of her mother's room.

What frivolous relics of a departed life they were, yet how suggestive of youth and elegant pleasures!—a broken fan of delicately carved ivory and painted vellum, graces and sylphs disporting in a world of flowers; a long white glove, embroidered with gold, still bearing the impress of the little hand that had worn it; a Dijon rose, which still exhaled the faint suggestion of a long-departed sweetness; two or three pieces of rare old lace, yellow with age; a few letters, closely written and crossed, from married sisters; a handful of dead violets; and, lastly, something which filled Dulcie with wonder, simple as the thing was in itself.

A yellow ribbon, the very colour and texture of that old-fashioned ribbon which Dulcie had found on the hearth-rug in Dora Blake's sitting-room.

She sat with the ribbon in her hand, about a yard in length, not soiled or worn, but with folds that showed that it had been tied, perhaps as a loop for that broken fan. Yes, it was exactly the same ribbon; there could be no doubt of it. Either Dora Blake must have got her piece from Lady Courtenay, or Lady Courtenay must have got hers from Aunt Dora.

'Unless there was a rage for this kind of ribbon at that time,' thought Dulcie, 'but that can hardly be, for I am sure this ribbon is more than twenty years old. It is the sort of thing our great-grandmothers wore. Well, it is a small mystery to worry one's brain about. Miss Blake must have given a piece to mamma, or mamma to Miss Blake. That is certain.'

She remembered Aunt Dora's somewhat confused and troubled manner when she had talked about the yellow ribbon. Could such a trifle as that involve some sorrowful memory—some association full of pain and sadness? Vain to sit wondering there. Dulcie lifted the ribbon to her lips before she put it back in the drawer.

'Poor little ribbon, stray leaflet from the past. I am sure you are half a century old. You had curious, half-tender associations for my dear mother, I dare say, when she wore you to tie up a bunch of roses, or as a loop for her fan. You may have belonged to some maiden aunt, a famous belle, perhaps, who died in her youth—or to some dear old indulgent grandmamma, who wore yellow ribbons in her cap. For me your history is a blank, as mysterious as the life of Cheops.'

She closed the drawer and locked the cabinet, and then resumed her progress through the rooms, till it was time for luncheon, after which hurried meal the carriage came to the door and Morton arrived with his travelling bag.

It was a pleasant journey for Dulcie and Morton, in spite of the parting that lay before them at the end of the way. For these two it was happiness to be together. Sir Everard seemed more cheerful when he had turned his back upon Fairview. He talked about the coming election, discussed Morton's hopes, and gave him some good advice, which the young man fully appreciated.

They stayed a couple of days in Paris to please Morton, went the round of churches and galleries which all had seen before, but which Dulcie was delighted to see in her lover's society; drove in the wintry Bois; saw all the world of fashion and beauty; wasted a good deal of money at Boissiers, buying artistic baskets and dainty satin boxes filled with sugar-plums; dined at the last restaurant à la mode; and wound up with a delightful evening at Molière's classic theatre, where the elegant Favart and the seductive Delaunay played an idyllic drama by De Musset. Those two days were full of delight for Morton. They were only too brief, and then on the evening of the second he drove with Sir Everard and his daughter to the Lyons station, and saw them seated in the train which was to carry them to the South.

'I shall come to you directly the election is over,' he said, 'if you have not returned before then.'

'My dear fellow, Parliament will meet by the time the election is over, and you will have your senatorial duties to attend to,' replied Sir Everard.

Morton stood by the carriage door, with Dulcie's hand clasped in his, till the last moment. It was their first parting. They looked at each other with pale, pained faces, tearless but despairing. Then came the guards bustling along, authoritative, military of aspect; then the rush and turmoil of people who could not find places; then a shriek, a whistle—their clinging hands parted—and Dulcie was gone. Morton went gloomily back to the shabby, half-built boulevard outside the big station.

'What a horrid place Paris is for a man to be alone in!' he said to himself, as he walked back to the Bristol. 'I shall be off at seven to-morrow morning.'

He was at Tangley by eleven o'clock on the following night, moody and out of spirits, feeling that all the delight and hopefulness of his life was gone.

'How fondly, how intensely she loves him!' he said to himself, thinking of Dulcie and her father. 'Would to God that I could trust him as she trusts him—that I could honour him as she honours him. Yes, for her sake I would be blind, if heaven

would grant me the gift of blindness. But I cannot forget how he shrank from answering my question that night—how he put me off with generalities, with indignant assertions that evaded the point at issue.'

CHAPTER XXV.

DULCIE SACRIFICES HERSELF.

It was early in February, and all along the sunlit Riviera the world was waking to the first faint breath of spring. A sapphire sky reflected itself in a sapphire sea, and save for a murderous cold wind now and then, the sojourner in that southern world might flatter himself that he had cheated time out of a winter.

Sir Everard and his daughter had been roving along the seaboard, stopping a few days here and a week there, and hurrying off impatiently from another place at the whim of the invalid, who was curiously restless and difficult to please. He missed his library, and the quiet life of Fairview, which perhaps was more congenial to his meditative character than any other kind of life, albeit he had never seemed quite happy even at Fairview.

Dulcie bore with his whims, and soothed his restless spirits with inexhaustible patience. Every other hope and wish in her mind had given place to the one ardent desire to spin out the weak thread of her father's days—to sweeten the remnant of his life.

She bore without a murmur her separation from Morton, dearly as she loved him, and although it seemed to her as if all the brightness and youth were taken out of her life now that he and she were parted. The key-note of her existence was not gladness, but resignation.

Her father's health seemed to improve after they reached the South, but his spirits were variable, and that restlessness which Dulcie noticed soon after they left Paris—that utter weariness of soul which made the shortest winter day too long—was almost worse than physical pain or weakness. Nothing they saw in their shifting from place to place interested or amused him. He avoided society as much as possible, and most of all avoided his own countrymen, who were to be found in possession of the hotels wherever they went.

'If we could only find some quiet place where you and I could be alone together with nature and our favourite books!' he said to Dulcie; and in quest of this tranquil retreat they travelled backwards and forwards along the sea-coast, in a vague,

purposeless way which would have been dispiriting to a business-like tourist.

At last, a little way inland from Marseilles, out of the beat of the common run of travellers, Sir Everard found a spot that pleased him. It was a little town on the side of a sandy hill, crested with pines. A few villas were scattered among the pine trees. The air was exhilarating, and there was a distant view of the Mediterranean. It was something like Bournemouth, before Bournemouth became a popular watering-place.

Sir Everard hired one of the white-walled villas near the top of the hill, a small low house, sheltered on the landward side by a thick grove of pines, its front windows overlooking a wide sweep of blue water.

'Here we will stay till we cross to Algiers,' said Sir Everard, and he seemed in no hurry to visit the African shore.

He ordered a piano from Marseilles, and a big case of new books from Paris, and settled himself down to his old studious and meditative life, with something of the old repose. Dulcie was delighted.

The mornings were warm enough for them to sit out of doors among the pine trees; the sun was sometimes so hot at noontide as to necessitate the use of Dulcie's biggest parasol.

'I really think we have succeeded in running away from the winter, papa,' she said gaily. 'You ought to buy this villa, and then we could come here every year.'

'The world is wide, my darling. Why should we anchor ourselves to one spot? We may winter in Egypt next year.'

'And then Morton will be with us, will he not, papa?' hazarded Dulcie, blushing. 'I suppose I shall be married before this year is ended? You know, dearest, I don't mean my marriage to separate me from you. I shall be your daughter all the same, and obedient to you in all things. Morton will be your adopted son.'

'You do not know what you are talking about, Dulcie,' answered her father impatiently. 'The kind of thing you propose is not possible. Other daughters have talked like you, time out of mind, and it has all ended in nothing. When Desdemona marries, she follows her Moor to Cyprus, and poor old Brabantio is deserted.'

'I think in the play, papa, that is Brabantio's fault. It was he who flung off his daughter.'

It was on the evening after this conversation that Dulcie and her father were sitting side by side in the verandah, watching the moonlit waves, and the yellow lights of the little town twinkling under a purple sky. The post had come in half an hour ago. There had been several letters for Sir Everard, but none for Dulcie. He had been silent and gloomy since the

reading of his letters, and his daughter feared that one of them must have brought ill news of some kind. Whatever it might be, she waited patiently for him to reveal his trouble, feeling that it was wiser to leave him undisturbed till he chose to speak. She was at his side, ready to be his confidant if he needed her sympathy.

They had sat almost in silence for nearly half an hour, when Sir Everard laid his hand gently on his daughter's shoulder and drew her nearer to him.

'Dulcie,' he said softly, 'are you happy with me?'

'Quite happy, dear father.'

'And this retired, studious life, hidden from the world, unambitious, uneventful, pleases and satisfies you?'

'I can imagine no pleasanter kind of life.'

'That is well,' he answered, and then relapsed into silence for some minutes.

'My darling,' he began after that long pause, 'I think you know that I love you. I think you will believe, however inconsistent my conduct may seem, that I love you as truly and as dearly as father ever loved daughter since this world was created.'

'Yes, papa, I have perfect faith in your love,' she answered, trembling a little.

'And yet I am going to distress you. I am going to ask you to sacrifice something very dear to your heart.'

'Sacrifice is the proof of love, dear father,' she answered gently. 'I am prepared to make any sacrifice for your sake.'

'I want you to give up Morton.'

'Father!' she exclaimed with a faint cry, as if of physical pain. 'Yes, I thought it was that,' she said quietly.

'There are reasons why your union with him could never bring happiness either to him or to you I felt this when he first proposed for you, and I set my face against such an engagement, as you know. In an evil hour, seeing that your heart was concerned in the matter, I weakly yielded. But I have felt ever since that I have done wrong. I have felt more firmly convinced as time went by that the engagement must result in misery.'

'But why, father? for what reason? I am ready to obey you. I am willing to make any sacrifice for your sake. Yes, even to part from him who is dearer to me than anything on earth except yourself. You shall always be first. I have told you that. But pray do not treat me like a child. If there is some good reason why Morton and I cannot be happy together, let me know it, and understand it, and I will accept my fate.'

'Unfortunately I cannot tell you my reason. You must take it on trust.'

'And did this same reason influence you when you first refused to sanction our engagement?'

'In part, yes.'

'Oh, father, why did you yield then? I could easier have borne to give him up then than now. Every hour we have spent together has made him nearer and dearer to me, until he has become a part of my life. It would have been better for me if you had been cruel then, if you had been blind to my silent regret, and let the sorrow wear itself out. Perhaps it would have worn itself out in time; though I fancied it was going to be the sorrow of a lifetime.'

'All fancy, dear child,' answered Sir Everard soothingly. 'Hearts are not so easily broken. Steel yourself to endure the agony of a sudden wrench, and a year hence you will wonder that this sacrifice could have cost you so much.'

'You say that! Yet you have never forgotten my mother.'

Sir Everard started, like one who feels a sudden touch upon an old wound—a touch that thrills through every nerve.

'That was different,' he answered huskily. 'She was my wife, my own. We had one short year of bliss, and then came—ruin. No man could forget such a blow as that. But a girl's first lover is like a child's first doll—dearer than anything else in the world, till she gets a new one.'

'Father!' cried Dulcie, with a sob.

'Yes, I know I must seem hard and cruel, but I have your welfare at heart, darling. This marriage could not make you happy. There is that in Morton's character which must result in misery to you.'

'He is noble-minded, conscientious, truthful—full of thought for others.'

'You cannot read him as I read him, or know him as I know him. But I will urge this question no further. If you have made up your mind to marry him, in opposition to my most urgent desire, let the engagement go on. But if you want to make me happy you must give up Morton Blake.'

'You know that I would lay down my life for your happiness. But this is so strange, so sudden. You give me no reason, or only a vague reason, for such an act. My mind is utterly bewildered.'

'Take a week to think about it,' said Sir Everard, quietly.

'That looks like disobedience.'

'My love, I will not so think of it. I know that I must seem to you inconsistent, arbitrary, cruel even. But, as I live, Dulcie, the grief I would have you endure for my sake to-day, will save you a more terrible grief in the future. I should have foreseen this earlier. I have been weak, blameworthy. I am a sinner, and I need all your charity, all your patience.'

'You are the best and dearest of men,' sobbed Dulcie, with her tearful face hidden upon his breast. 'How could I hope to

have you and Morton? It would be too much for heaven to grant to one woman.'

Then, after a pause, she lifted her head, and looked in her father's face with an almost childlike simplicity.

'Papa, if I give him up, do you think he will marry Lady Frances?'

'I think it is not improbable.'

'That will make my life harder to bear. That will be very bitter.'

Not another word was said about Morton, either by Sir Everard or his daughter. This confirmed an idea that had flashed across Dulcie's mind when Sir Everard began to speak about her renunciation of Morton. She loved her father with such perfect trustfulness that she could not believe him capable of wantonly grieving her. He would not have asked her to make this sacrifice without some good and sufficient reason, and it might be that he withheld that reason rather than wound her womanly pride by telling her that Morton was false or fickle.

She had felt a few faint pangs of jealousy that Christmas night at Tangley, when Morton and Frances were waltzing, with the air of people to whom it was natural to be together. Many a careless familiarity of Frances Grange's had struck her on that Christmas Day. Every word she said to Morton revealed a long and intimate acquaintance—the friendly association of years; while an undefinable something in the lady's tone and manner hinted at a warmer feeling than friendship.

Brooding upon these past impressions, and even exaggerating them in the light of her new-born fears, Dulcie gradually convinced herself that her father knew more of Morton's sentiments than he cared to tell her. She remembered that curious change in her lover's manner which had wounded and alarmed her during the period before the trial at Highclere. She remembered his fitful spirits, his intervals of silence and moodiness—all accounted for at the time by his anxiety as to the result of the trial. Looking back at his conduct now, she told herself that this trouble of mind might have marked the gradual arising of a change of feeling, the slow awakening to the consciousness that Frances Grange—endeared by old associations—had a stronger hold upon his heart than the girl whom he had chosen for his wife.

Always doubtful of her own merits, it seemed to Dulcie that Lady Frances was fascinating enough to lure any lover away from such an insignificant little person as herself. Yet the thought of Morton's inconstancy stung her to the quick, and it needed all her courage and all her pride to bear the blow.

Dulcie played to her father, and read to him, and walked

with him, and drove with him in the usual way; smiled at him, even, when he was inclined to be cheerful; but the sweet young face had a pale, rigid look, that went to Sir Everard's heart. He suffered almost as acutely as she did.

One morning, in something less than a week after the conversation in the verandah, Dulcie came to her father as he sat writing letters in the sunny little room which he had made his study.

'Papa, will you please write me the draft of a letter to Morton, telling him that he and I are to part?' she asked meekly. 'I don't know how to say it.'

Sir Everard wrote the letter, and Dulcie copied it, adding a few lines of her own, and brought it to him ready for the mid-day mail.

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHISTLED DOWN THE WIND.

February was over, and the Highclere election had begun in the cold and rain of a severe March. The Conservative interest was strong in the old county town, and Morton Blake found that he had a hard fight before him. He was not a popular man in his neighbourhood. He was respected and liked by his equals; they knew his sterling qualities; but that lower section of society which sees a landed proprietor only from the outside did not care about Morton Blake. They knew him only as a young man of reserved manners, who never drank or played billiards at the 'Peacock;' who was rarely seen at local race meetings, and took no part in local cricket matches. Middle-aged people who remembered his father took delight in disparaging the son. His liberal opinions went against him among people who were always praising the days that were gone, and who considered free trade the ruin of England. If he had been a good old Tory, and had clamoured for the revival of the sliding scale, he would have had plenty of supporters among the farmers and burgesses of Southern Daleshire. But opinions which would have won him friends at Blackford only made him enemies at Highclere. Education for the million, and coffee taverns, and national thrift, and even a cheap loaf were questions of no interest to a town which had grown up and flourished upon ignorance, beer, and high prices. Then he had Sir Nathaniel Ritherdon for his opponent, a man who spent a great deal of money in the town, who was known to be a sworn foe to all co-operative associations, whose opinions were so mildly commonplace, and whose utterances were so

amiably vague that he pleased everybody. Morton fought his battle honestly and well. He was a fine speaker, expressing himself with a vigorous directness which won praise even from those who objected to his politics as dangerous and revolutionary. He had a noble voice—deep, resonant—and he knew how to use it. He had a handsome, intelligent face and a good figure, and he was admired as a fine specimen of the English Radical. But as a Radical he was feared, and his electioneering tactics were somewhat too bold and independent to succeed with an old-fashioned borough like Highclere, where, with the advance of civilization, direct and open bribery had only given place to indirect corruption. His agent plainly told Morton that the line he was taking was not the road to success; whereupon Morton replied that he would stand or fall as an honest man should.

'Then I'm sorry to say I think you'll fall,' answered the agent. 'Mind, I'm not the man to counsel anything like bribery; but there's such a thing as being too squeamish in electioneering matters. The code of honour is a trifle wider, you see, in a business of that kind than——'

'I never heard of but one code of honour, and I shall regulate my conduct by that,' said Morton.

'Obstinate fool,' thought the agent. 'Is it meanness, or rustic prejudice, I wonder, that influences him?'

Then he answered, with a shrug of his shoulders,—

'I take it that your object is to get into Parliament, and that the mode and manner of your getting there is a detail which you could afford to leave in the hands of a trustworthy agent. Yours is not the first craft that I've navigated through some ugly shoals.'

'I wouldn't go to heaven if I had to get there by a dirty road,' retorted Morton.

The result was exactly as the agent had anticipated. Sir Nathaniel spent two thousand pounds upon bill-sticking, beer, and indirect bribery, and came in at the head of the poll; Morton spent nine hundred upon stationery, postage stamps, agents' fees, and the hire of a room in which to give utterance to his opinions, and his name was lowest in the list. An intelligent minority had voted for him as an earnest politician and an original thinker; but the masses were true to the old candidate, who knew the way to their hearts.

Morton went home to Tangley after the election, sorely depressed and disappointed. His agent had told him that he would fail; but his belief in the goodness and honesty of his fellow-men had been stronger than his belief in the agent's acumen. He had seen a crowded audience thrill as he spoke; he had seen the glow of enthusiasm in men's faces; he had heard the accent of truth in their loud cheers. He knew that he

had touched the hearts of the best among the electors, that he had shown them his mind, convinced them of his earnestness. And yet the majority preferred to be represented by a twaddling old gentleman, who spoke once or twice in a session, and then delivered himself of truisms which had been old-fashioned, or obsolete, in the days when Samuel Johnson was a parliamentary reporter.

At home Morton found unlimited sympathy. His aunt consoled him with quiet sweetness ; his sisters were loudly indignant, but not without reproachfulness.

'If you had let us give more garden parties last summer, such an insult could never have been offered to the family,' protested Tiny.

'If you had taken more interest in the bazaar in aid of the restoration of the frescoes in the chancel of St. Mary's, all the church people would have voted for you,' said Horatia, who was enthusiastic about things ecclesiastical.

'I hope you will never again stand for Highclere,' said Lizzie Hardman, pale with indignation. 'The stupid people are not worthy of you. At Blackford you would be appreciated. My uncle and my brother were delighted with your speeches. I sent them the Highclere paper with the report of the meetings at which you spoke. They are only working people, and perhaps I ought not to talk about their opinions here. But they are warm politicians.'

'My dear Lizzie, I am very glad to be appreciated by them,' Morton answered kindly.

He had turned with a touch of weariness from his sisters' reproaches, and even from his aunt's consolations, but these remarks of Lizzie's had a soothing effect. It was something to be understood even by brawny-armed workers at Blackford. Was it not precisely this class whose interest he had most at heart, the rugged sons of toil, from whose ranks his grandfather had risen ?

Among his women-kind he bore himself bravely, too proud to let any one see how deeply he was disappointed, how ardently he had hoped for a different result. He made light of the matter when Tiny and Horatia harped upon the iniquity of elections in general, and the shameless ingratitude of the electors of Highclere in particular.

'I'm sure the money we have spent in that town would make a golden obelisk as big as Cleopatra's Needle, if it could all be melted down,' said Tiny petulantly ; 'and *now* I hope you will let us belong to the Civil Service Co-operative Stores, and get our Berlin wool and things at wholesale prices.'

Morton went to smoke his cigar on the common directly after dinner in order to escape such sympathy as this. Bleak and moonless as the night was, it was pleasanter to him to ramble

among these black furze bushes by the narrow sandy paths which he had known from a child, than to sit in the drawing-room and hear his sisters bewail his failure. He was altogether depressed and out of spirits. A week had gone by without bringing him any letter from Dulcie, who until now had written every other day. He began to fear that she was ill, or that Sir Everard was worse—dying, perhaps—and his daughter alone with him in a strange country.

'There is one comfort in my failure,' he said to himself. 'There is nothing to tie me to England now. I shall start for Marseilles to-morrow morning, and surprise Dulcie in her villa among the pine trees.'

After a long walk about the common he went home, wonderfully cheered at the prospect of a speedy meeting with Dulcie. He went straight to his dressing-room, and packed his portmanteau, being at all times supremely independent of service. He consulted Bradshaw, found that there was no possibility of starting before the night mail from Dover, and then, some time after midnight, went to bed, with very little hope of sleeping.

In this he was agreeably disappointed, for, worn out with the excitement and the fatigue of the day, he slept heartily and long, and on waking found the wintry sun shining in at his window, and half a dozen letters on the table by his bed.

Among them there was the long-looked-for letter from Dulcie, a poor thin letter, instead of the usual three or four sheets of foreign paper. A withered violet dropped from the envelope as he tore it open.

'An emblem of my disappointed hopes,' said Morton, thinking of yesterday's failure.

This was Dulcie's letter:—

'My dear Morton,—After serious and painful consideration my father has resolved upon withdrawing his consent to our marriage. He has reasons of his own which he does not think fit to tell me, and I, as in duty bound, submit to his decision. If he were to tell me to lay my head upon the block, blindfold, I would do it; and in the same spirit of blind obedience to his will I write this letter.

'I hope you will forgive me if this act of mine should give you any pain; but I have some reasons of my own for believing that the rupture of our engagement will be rather a relief to you than a regret.

'I have packed all the presents you so generously gave me in a box, to be sent by rail—except the pretty vellum-bound "In Memoriam," which I venture to keep as a souvenir of our friendship.

'Your always faithful friend,

'Dulcibella Courtenay.'

Even the signature of this brief letter had an awful look. She had never so signed herself before. 'Your own Dulcie,' 'Your loving Dulcie,' 'Your fondest, truest Dulcie.' This had been the style of thing for the last year—and now, with a grand flourish of her pen, bold and free as if the hand that wrote had never trembled or faltered for a moment, appeared this formal signature, which looked formidable enough for a death-warrant —'DULCIBELLA COURTENAY.'

The first two sentences in the letter were her father's composition. The rest was her own.

Morton could not tell that the brief, formal note had been wrung from a breaking heart. He only felt the cruelty of the stroke. He was coldly, curtly dismissed; and that was all.

'She could hardly write less if she were sending away a servant,' he said to himself.

And then, re-reading the letter, and seeing that the act was Sir Everard's, and that Dulcie was only the instrument, a horrible idea flashed upon him.

'Why, this is his retaliation for the doubts I ventured to express that last night at Fairview,' he said to himself. 'I remember his livid look of anger—the passion with which he repelled my questions. Oh, there can be no longer a doubt. It was he whose horse's hoofs were printed on the spot where my father fell; it was he—false friend—jealous husband—who struck that deadly blow, and not the cur who lies rotting in Portland Prison. My hideous fear—the horror I have struggled to shut out of my mind—was not a baseless apprehension. I accept my release. Yes, Dulcie, you are right. It is a relief to me to be free. Dearly as I love you, my sweet one, it is better that I should be free to avenge my father's murder. That is my first duty. Would Orestes have stopped to make love and take a wife when once his task was set for him—when once he knew what fate had given him to do? Oh, my poor, pretty Ophelia, I will take back my gifts, the pledges of a happy love. Such bliss was never meant for you and me. For me life has sterner claims and harder duties. For you—oh, my love, my love, what is to become of you if I pursue the purpose that is in my mind? Is your gentle heart to be broken?'

He read the letter again, and saw Sir Everard's hand in it. Could Dulcie, who had so innocently revealed to him the singleness of her heart, the depth of her love, could she thus whistle him down the wind? No; the letter had been wrung from her bleeding heart. That curt dismissal, so coldly worded, was doubtless the result of a bitter struggle. It was to bring about this separation that Sir Everard had taken his daughter away. Even the story of his ill-health was perhaps a pretence invented to this end.

Morton answered Dulcie's letter with even greater brevity than her own.

'DEAREST,—I accept your decree, but I shall love you to the end of my life. Whatever may happen, even if it be my fate to bring you sorrow, remember and believe this always—I love, have loved, and shall love you only.

'MORTON.

'P.S.—God bless you for keeping the little Tennyson.'

'So ends an old song,' he said to himself.

He avoided making an appearance at the family breakfast-table by pleading the press of important business, letters that must be written in time for the mid-day post; knowing that the too penetrating eyes of his aunt and sisters, to say nothing of Lizzie Hardman's steadfast gaze, would read his agitation in his pale, troubled face.

'I don't mean to tell them anything yet awhile,' he said to himself.

Perhaps that one particular detail in all the circumstances of his grief which a man most dreads and abhors in such a case is the overwhelming sympathy of his feminine acquaintances. This morning Morton would have thought Alexander Selkirk in his desert island the most enviable character on the face of the globe.

His aunt Dora brought the breakfast-tray to the library, and stood beside his chair, and bent over him, and laid her soft, cool hand on his burning forehead.

'My dearest boy, you are in a fever,' she exclaimed. 'You must have had a sleepless night?'

'No, auntie, I slept wonderfully well.'

'Yet you look so pale and haggard. My poor boy, I'm afraid you feel this disappointment more than I thought you did from your manner last night.'

'Well, I am naturally a little provoked at a dumb dog like good pompous old Sir Nathaniel being preferred to an energetic young man with ideas of his own. But I shall soon get over it, auntie. I have had a good deal of worry and work, you know, in the last three weeks, and that has exhausted me.'

'I see you had a letter from Dulcie this morning,' said Miss Blake, one of whose many duties was the opening of the post-bag, 'but not the usual budget. I hope Sir Everard is no worse.'

'No, he is about the same.'

'And Dulcie, is she quite well?'

'Oh yes; she is pretty well.'

'Sweet child! How I miss her! She is such a loving little soul. Try to get a little more sleep, Morton, when you have finished your letters. You look tired to death.'

'Really, dear aunt, there is nothing amiss with me. And when I have written my letters I am going off on a short journey. I have some business to do at Avonmore, and I shall not be home till nearly midnight. Don't let anybody except Andrew sit up for me, that's a dear good auntie.'

'At Avonmore! What can you possibly have to do at Avonmore?'

'Nothing very particular; but I am glad to have something to occupy me this afternoon, as it will put the election out of my head.'

'That is an advantage, certainly. But pray don't tire yourself at Avonmore.'

'No fear of that. I shall drive over to Highclere in the dog-cart, and Sims can put up there and bring me back at night. And now, best of aunts, if I am to write my letters——'

'I must leave you to yourself. Yes, I understand. Give my fondest love to Dulcie.'

'That letter was written before I came downstairs. Shall I put your message on the envelope, to be spelt out by all the postmen between here and Provence?'

'Well, I think not. I shall write to my pet this afternoon. If I were to tell her how ill and wretched you look this morning she'd be miserable.'

'Tell her I am well and happy,' said Morton, with a curious laugh. 'There is nothing like putting a good face upon things.'

Morton's letters were only an excuse for being alone. He wrote a few lines to his parliamentary agent, enclosing a cheque —for even failure is expensive; wrote with friendly brevity to Sir Nathaniel, congratulating him on his triumph; and then he flung himself into his arm-chair, and sat with his elbows on his knees, brooding upon the past and forecasting the future.

His path was dark, and beset with difficulty. He could hardly take a step forward which would not hasten the coming of sorrow to the girl he loved. Yet to stand still, or to go back, seemed to him impossible.

CHAPTER XXVII.

POOR LUCY.

AVONMORE is one of the genteelest towns in England. There is positively nothing common or unclean in it. It manufactures nothing, it gives employment to nobody, it knows nothing of the working classes, it has no outer fringe of shabby streets and labouring-men's cottages. It is a pure and perfect chrysolite

set in the garden-land of England, a land of green pastures, watered by a picturesque but weedy river that never turned a mill or served any useful purpose in its life, but which glides along its serpentine course placidly, between willow-shaded banks. The High Street is as broad as Regent Street, and sparkles with shops which only appeal to the wealthy. The two chief hotels are as elegantly luxurious and as expensive as Claridge's. The gentle slopes which the natives call hills are dotted with white-walled villas, girdled with exquisitely kept gardens, rich in monkey-trees, deodaras, Wellingtonias, and all the aristocracy of foreign timber.

'The finest society in England is to be had at Avonmore,' said Mr. Churchill Green, as he finished his hashed mutton, and turned his chair to the fire in the untidy little back parlour behind his shop, 'but it is an infernally stagnant hole for a man to earn his living in.'

His wife sat in a low chair in the opposite corner of the hearth nursing her last baby. A sickly mother with hollow, hectic cheeks and a dry, hacking cough; a flabby-looking infant, dribbling in an imbecile manner over a soiled and crumpled pinafore.

'I don't know how it is for other people,' replied Mrs. Green mournfully; 'some of them seem to get on well enough, and even to make their fortunes, but it doesn't answer with us. Perhaps if you were to stick closer to business, Churchill——'

'Closer to business,' echoed Mr. Green scornfully; 'will my closeness bring customers? If I were to be as close as an oyster, would that fill my shop? Didn't I stay at home and sit yawning over the *Telegraph* behind that blessed counter all yesterday afternoon? and what are we the richer for my self-denial?'

'Two young ladies came, Churchill.'

'Yes, and after turning over three portfolios of songs and waltzes decided there was nothing they cared about, and walked out of the shop without spending sixpence. I wish I dealt in cheeses, or eel pies, or rags and bones, or pigs' trotters,' cried Churchill savagely, 'for then I might find an appreciative public.'

'I have often advised you to try some other business,' said the wife, with meek reproachfulness, the kind of half-resigned, half-complaining, and wholly miserable tone which irritates a husband's nerves like the perpetual dropping of water—a small nuisance, but horrible from its continuity.

'Oh, hang it all,' exclaimed Churchill, as he knocked the ashes out of his blackened meerschaum, 'I couldn't stand an ungentlemanly trade if it were to bring in thousands.'

Lucy Green gave a little whimpering sigh as she bent over the sickly baby, and lifted the limp little hand to her lips.

'I wouldn't care what the trade was if it gave us good food and decent clothes, Charley,' she said. She always called her husband Charley when she was most in earnest. 'I'm sure I felt as bad as if somebody was putting a knife into me this afternoon, when I saw those children going to school in patched clothes and worn-out boots. What's the good of waiting for concert engagements that don't come? If it wasn't for a circus now and then, and a piano or two to tune, you wouldn't earn a five-pound note in a twelvemonth. It's only the kindness of—my friends'—she faltered a little here, and looked furtively at her husband, whose face had clouded over with a sudden scowl—'it's only their kindness keeps us from starvation.'

'Perhaps if your friends were a little less mysterious in their benevolence I might feel more grateful,' retorted Mr. Green. 'But it isn't a pleasant idea for a husband that his wife gets her money from nobody knows whom.'

'The money seems as welcome to you as to me, Charley. You always help to spend it.'

'I suppose I have a right to live, Lucy.'

'Nobody denies that, Churchill. Don't I slave to put a decent dinner on the table, and feed the poor children on bread and treacle half the week, so that you may have a little bit of hot supper when you come home tired of a night? But it does seem hard upon us all when you go and spend money in a tavern parlour rather than make yourself happy at home.'

'Happy!' echoed Green, with a contemptuous survey of the shabby room and the faded wife. 'A fine place for a man to be happy in—a chorus of squalling brats, varied by a solo from a grumbling wife. If it were not for the relief I get from a little pleasant society of an evening I should cut my throat.'

'I don't think I shall be here to trouble you very much longer,' said Lucy, looking at him with eyes that were slowly filling with tears. The look was pathetic, but the husband had seen it so often that it had lost its power to move him. 'And if you don't give any more thought to the poor children when I am gone than you do now, they won't be very long a burden upon you, for with their weakly constitutions they need all a father's care.'

'They need a father's purse, my girl, and mine's empty,' answered Green, putting away his pipe and rising to depart.

He settled his collar, and arranged his hair before the shabby little glass over the mantelpiece; and then, feeling that he had not been quite so kind as he might have been to the weak piece of humanity which he had wedded, he bent down and gave his wife a gentle pat on the shoulder with one hand, while he offered the forefinger of the other to his baby, who clutched at it convulsively and examined it with a frowning intentness, as if

the paternal finger were a natural curiosity seen for the first time.

'Cheer up, old girl,' said Green; 'a creaking door always hangs longest on its hinges. You'll go on creaking for many a year to come, I'll be bound.'

'I don't think so, Charley. My chest's awfully bad, and the pain in my side gets worse every day.'

'It's all on account of these villainous east winds. You'll pick up directly there's a change in the weather. Ta ta.'

'Where are you going, Churchill, in such a hurry?'

'To the station. There's a concert at Blackford this evening, and a new contralto I've set my heart on hearing. I shall go third class. Three bob there and back, and I shall be home before one in the morning. Don't sit up for me, Lucy; but just have a bit of something hot on the kitchen hob, as per usual.'

He was gone before she could remonstrate. She sat rocking the baby on her knees, while a few slow tears rolled down her wasted cheeks.

'Three shillings for railway fare, and something for his tea at Blackford, even if he gets into the concert all for nothing,' she murmured dolefully. 'Five shillings would buy Mattie a pair of boots, and the poor child's feet are on the ground. God help me, I was so proud of Churchill's musical genius when I married him; and now I hate the name of concerts, and organs, and oratorios, and the whole lot of it.'

The bell hanging on the shop door gave a jingling ring, and Lucy Green started up in an agitated manner, hurriedly deposited the flabby bundle of infant life in the cradle, and hastened into the shop. A gentleman was standing in front of the counter, looking about him thoughtfully.

'Did you wish to see our newest music, sir?' asked Mrs. Green, summoning up her most cheerful smile, and trying to look like a prosperous tradesman's wife, painfully conscious all the while of her faded gown and untidy hair, which the baby had been clawing a few minutes ago.

'I am not a customer, madam,' answered the stranger, with grave politeness. 'I wish to have a little private conversation with you, if you will allow me. I believe you are Mrs. Green?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I am known—slightly—to your relation, Mrs. Dawley, of Holbrook Farm.'

'Indeed, sir. Then I'm sure you're welcome,' exclaimed Lucy, brightening. 'Mrs. Dawley is my aunt, and the best of aunts. How was she looking, sir, when you last saw her?'

'Glorious. I met her in Highclere market-place only a week ago, and she looked blooming and hearty.'

'Dear old Highclere,' said Mrs. Green regretfully. 'How I

love that place! It isn't as fashionable or as handsome a town as this, I know, but it's nearer my old home, and I knew it when I was a light-hearted girl, without a care. That makes the difference, you see, sir. Will you please to step into the parlour, sir, and make yourself at home? It's a poor place, for we're limited as to room, you see, everything being sacrificed to the shop, and with children about one can never keep a room tidy.'

'Pray don't apologize,' said Morton Blake. 'I dare say you would rather have disorder with the children, than order without them.'

'Yes, indeed, sir, I should be sorry to lose one, though it's a wearing life.'

Her hollow cough gave emphasis to the remark. It was a life that seemed likely to wear into death before she was much older.

'I want to talk to you about the past, when you were in service at Templewood.'

'Ah, sir, those were the happiest days of my life. Seeing me now, you'd never believe what a giddy, flighty young creature I was then. But what interest can that time have to you, sir?'

'A great deal. I am hunting up details of family history in order to work out a law case in which I am interested. You understand?'

'Not exactly, sir,' answered Mrs. Green, with a puzzled look; 'but you must bear in mind that I've no head for business. Green is always telling me that.'

Morton had invented this pretext as he came along, feeling that it would be necessary to allege some motive for his inquiries.

'You were with Miss Alice Rothney before her marriage, I believe?' he said.

'Yes, sir, I was own maid to Miss Alice and her sisters. Ah, she was a sweet young lady, poor flower, cut off in her bloom and beauty.'

Her eyes filled with tears, and she turned away her head with a choking sob as she felt in her pocket for her handkerchief, fumbling nervously in her agitation.

'You were very fond of her, I see,' said Morton kindly.

'Fond of her! I loved her as if she had been my own flesh and blood. She was a kind mistress to me, and I was true and faithful to her. Yes, God knows I would have gone through fire and water to serve her!'

'Was she happy in her married life?' asked Morton, intensely interested.

It seemed to him that he was on the right track. Mrs. Green was inclined to be communicative. The floodgates of memory

were open, and all would be easy. But at this question she became suddenly on her guard. She drew herself up, tightened her lips, dried her tears, and became as it were a woman of marble.

'She had the best of husbands, sir, and the most devoted.'

'But that does not always ensure happiness. She may have had a previous attachment. She may have been unhappy in her memory of a former lover.'

'If it were so, sir, it wouldn't be my place to talk about it, especially with a stranger. I was true to my lady in life, and I wish to be true to her in death.'

'I would not for the world assail your fidelity. But there is a reason why the details of Lady Courtenay's married life and of her death are deeply interesting to me. It is no idle curiosity that moves me; be assured of that. It is in the cause of truth and justice that I ask these questions.'

Lucy Green looked at him with a scared expression, pale to the lips.

'You, from your association with the neighbourhood, must have been interested in the trial at Highclere last December,' continued Morton. 'Tell me frankly, now, do you think the man who was condemned for the murder of Walter Blake was the real murderer?'

She never took her eyes from his face. The pale lips assumed a purple tinge, the hectic flush came and went upon the sunken cheeks.

'This woman is in the secret,' thought Morton.

'What strange questions you ask!' she faltered; 'and what could that man's guilt or innocence have to do with Lady Courtenay?'

'Perhaps a great deal. Walter Blake had been Lady Courtenay's suitor before her marriage. It is possible that a husband's jealousy——'

'You have no right to say such things. You have no right to speak against the dead,' exclaimed Lucy, tremulous with anger. 'I was true to my lady while she was alive. Do you think I am going to be false to her now to gratify your malice? Why do you come here to rip up the secrets of the past?—if there were any secrets in her life—which there were not. Nobody ever slandered her while she was alive. Is she to be made light of after she has been lying in her grave twenty years?'

'Pray do not agitate yourself,' said Morton gently. 'I have not said a word against Lady Courtenay. If Walter Blake loved her, it is a reason why I should honour her memory. But I believe that Sir Everard Courtenay had a hand in Walter Blake's murder, and I believe that you could help me to discover the secret of his guilt.'

'Sir Everard Courtenay!' cried Lucy, with a laugh that had too hysterical a sound for genuine mirthfulness or genuine scorn. 'Why, he and Mr. Blake were old friends—old schoolfellows. Mr. Blake was as much at home at Fairview as Sir Everard himself.'

'What if that friendship was suddenly broken—if some act or word, innocent of all evil, perhaps—on the part of the wife awakened the husband's jealousy——'

'Oh, you are leading me on now about Sir Everard, as you led me on about Lady Courtenay. But you are wasting time and trouble. I have no secrets to tell, and if I had I would not speak one word against a good master, who was always kind and generous to me—yes, always generous,' she repeated, lapsing from hysterical laughter to hysterical tears. 'He has been a good friend to me in my trouble; with four children, and a husband who squanders more than he earns, what would become of me, do you think, if I hadn't a friend? and yet you, a stranger to me, come here and try to make me turn against him.'

She had risen in her agitation and had moved about the room, stooping over the cradle to arrange the baby's coverlet, with a wan hand that fluttered like a withered leaf in the faint evening wind. Morton had risen too, and had changed his place, so that he now stood with his face turned to the bright winter light, streaming through a window that looked northward.

'Why do you distress yourself, Mrs. Green?' he said, watching her intently. 'If there is nothing to conceal, or nothing to tell, what need of this agitation? But if you are keeping the secret of a crime—bribed perhaps to be silent—you are doing a wicked act, and no good can come to you or your children from the help which is given you as hush-money.'

'How dare you tell me I take hush-money?' she cried, trembling in every limb, and looking him straight in the face for the first time since they had shifted their position. 'How dare you insult——'

She stopped suddenly, with a faint shriek, and clasped her hands before her eyes, as if to shut him from her sight.

'My God,' she cried, 'Walter Blake's face!'

She sank into the nearest chair, cowering and shuddering as if she had seen a ghost.

'Oh, my poor Miss Alice, my poor Miss Alice! He was so good and brave and true, and loved her so dearly.'

Then she began to sob, big tears rolling down her wasted cheeks.

'Why do you come here to torment me, like a spirit from the dead?' she cried. 'You have no right to torture me like this.'

'Yes, I have the right to use every means in my power to

search out the secret of Walter Blake's murder,' answered Morton sternly, 'for he was my father.'

She rose again and came over to him, and looked him in the face earnestly, with piteous eyes, as if indeed he were a shadowy wanderer from the land where all things are forgotten.

'Yes, it is his face,' she murmured. 'I ought to have known it from the first. But I hardly saw you till just now. You sat with your back to the light, and I was so upset by what you said —and my sight has grown weaker every day since I've nursed my last baby. I ought to have guessed who you were at once. Your voice is like his, too—perhaps that's the reason I was so upset—for I'm a poor nervous creature.'

'Can you help me to bring his guilt home to my father's murderer?' asked Morton, waving away all her agitated protestations with a tone and look that indicated intentness of purpose.

'No. What should I know of the murder? I was with my poor dying mistress all that day. I never stirred outside Fairview—I hardly left her room.'

'And you know nothing—you can recall no suspicious circumstance? You can give me no clue?'

'Nothing—no—no.'

'You mean you will not.'

'No, I say I cannot—I know nothing. Why do you not believe what all the world believes—that the man who confessed to the crime was the man who did it?'

'Because I have the strongest reasons for thinking otherwise —yes, good and sufficient ground for believing that Sir Everard's was the hand that struck the blow.'

'You must be mad,' said Lucy, with her gaze still fixed on his face, as if drawn to it irresistibly by some influence of memory, love, or fear, stronger than her will. 'Sir Everard, a gentleman, lift his hand against his own friend! Impossible. Ah, Mr. Blake, Mr. Blake, why did you come here? My poor heart, how it beats! and the blood seems seething and bubbling in my poor weak head. Why do you bring up the past? I can't bear it—I can't bear it.'

She flung herself back into the chair, from which she had risen restlessly a minute before, and burst into passionate tears. Never had Morton seen a woman sob so bitterly, and the sight wrung his heart.

'My good soul, I am truly sorry,' he exclaimed, laying his hand gently, almost tenderly, upon her shoulder. 'Pray do not distress yourself in this way. If you have no knowledge of my father's death, if you are withholding nothing from me, there can be no cause for this agitation.'

'Yes, there can,' she cried passionately. 'There is another

cause. Cannot you understand? How dull you are! I knew your father so well, I saw him so often, when he came to Templewood courting Miss Alice. Oh, my God, his face rises before me now, as if it was only yesterday that he was standing by the holly hedge which shut off the kitchen-garden from the shrubbery, talking to me about my young mistress. He used to make a friend of me, and give me messages and little notes for her, for she was hardly out of the nursery at that time, and Lady George kept her very close. It used to please Mr. Blake to talk to me about her, for I could tell him all she said about him, and what he called her pretty ways. Of course it never occurred to him that any harm could come to *me* from all this talk. You fine gentlemen think that because we are servants we are not flesh and blood, that we have no hearts to feel, or fancies to be led astray. But though I was a lady's-maid I was a woman, and I grew to care more for him than I ought to have cared, and I was miserable about him, and took no pleasure in life except when he was near me, and my heart was gnawed with jealousy; and many a time when he has given me a letter for Miss Alice I have covered it with kisses, and carried it about in my bosom for hours before I gave it to her, and I've been tempted to destroy it in my jealous pain. Yet I was true to my lady through all, and never turned against her, or wavered in my love for her.'

She said all this with her wasted hands spread before her wasted face, her speech broken every now and then by a stifled sob. Now she let fall her hands, and looked at Morton once more, her face crimson with shame.

'Why do I tell you this now that he has been in his grave twenty years?' she asked. 'Heaven knows why. I have never told a creature before to-day; he never guessed it. I was not a bold, flirting girl, like some, and I would have died rather than betray myself to him. But you are his son. It seems to me almost as if you were himself, risen from the dead. And you wanted to know why I was so upset, and I have told you, and there's an end of it.'

This was said with an air that was half weary, half defiant. The air of one who was very tired of the burden of this life, and destined very soon to cast off that burden for ever.

'I am sorry for you with all my soul,' said Morton. 'I honour you for having loved him, and for having so faithfully kept the secret of that love. You can the better understand how I, his only son, who loved him passionately, am bent upon avenging his death.'

This renewed her tears.

'Don't talk to me about his death,' she pleaded. 'I can't bear it.'

He stood looking down at her thoughtfully for some minutes

while she sat struggling with her tears, and wiping them off her wan cheeks, sorely inclined to be hysterical, but conquering her agitation heroically. He felt profound pity for her weakness, physical and mental. He saw such signs of disease in her pallid face and shrunken form as could but move him to compassion. Yet he felt that, weak as she was, she had got the better of him, conquering his strength of will by her very weakness. He felt assured that she had some knowledge of circumstances bearing on his father's death, and that she was wilfully keeping that knowledge from him. Throughout the interview there had been a remorseful consciousness of wrong-doing in her manner. It was not grief for the dead alone which drew from her such passionate tokens of distress. There was guilt as well.

'You seem to be in a weak state of health,' he said kindly, when she had grown calmer and had taken the baby from his cradle, as if in the hope of finding some comfort in that feeble morsel of humanity, which she pressed tenderly to her breast, bending down to kiss the flabby little face, smiling into the blue eyes that stared wonderingly at her.

'Yes, I have had a hacking cough ever since last September, and I have been very low. Poor mother died in a decline, and my eldest sister went off last year just in the same way, and I suppose it will be my turn next. I shouldn't much mind if it wasn't for these poor children; but it's hard to leave them. Churchill means well, poor fellow; but he's wrapt up in music, and singing, and such like. He'll go twenty miles to hear a new church organ, or a new singer. He can't take care of the children as I do.'

'Please God you may be spared for some years yet. You seem to have rather a hard life here. The shop to mind——'

'Churchill is at home sometimes,' answered the wife with a deprecating air, 'but I do mind the shop mostly.'

'And the children to take care of——'

'Yes, it is a hard life to any one that's out of health,' assented Lucy with a sigh.

'Don't you think if you were to come into the fresh country air, among fields and woods, and have a comfortable cottage to live in, and a nice little servant to look after the children and wait upon you, you might get better?'

'Lor', sir, you might as well ask me if I thought I should get better in Paradise! Of course I should, but it's impossible.'

'Not at all. If you like to come to Tangley I'll give you one of the cottages on my estate, with a nice bit of garden, and I'll find an honest girl to nurse you and your children; and my aunt, who is about the best woman in the world, will take care that you want for nothing, till you get well and strong and are able to come back to your husband.'

'Oh, sir,' she said, clasping her hands rapturously, 'how generous and noble you are! Yes, you are indeed his son—like him who was the kindest of men.'

'Let it be a settled thing, then. I will have some furniture put into a cottage to-morrow—we have always plenty of chairs and tables and old bedsteads in the lumber-room at the manor,—and I will get my aunt to arrange everything. All you have to do is to get your husband's consent to your leaving him to take care of himself for a month or two.'

'I don't think he'll much mind, sir,' answered Lucy. 'He has often said he would like to give me a change of air if he could afford it, and it worries him, poor fellow, to hear my cough, and to know he can do nothing towards curing it. He has grumbled at my aunt Dawley because she hasn't asked me to go and stay at the farm; but then you see, sir, my aunt has her husband to study, and sick people are bad company. And even if she were to invite me to the farm she wouldn't have the children, and I should have to be parted from them, poor innocents.'

'You will be happier with your children round you, I am sure. Here is a trifle for the expenses of the journey.' He slipped a five-pound note into her hand. 'I'll write to you to-morrow to say how soon the cottage can be ready; and you can settle everything with Mr. Green in the meantime.'

'Oh, sir, I don't know how to thank you. You are too good. You are like your father. I can't say more than that.'

'I don't want any thanks. Good-bye, until I see you at Tangley;' and with this brief leave-taking Morton took up his hat and departed.

There had been no thought of self-interest in his kindness to Lucy. His heart had been touched by her distress, and still more so by the deep feeling she had shown in reference to his father. But after he had left her, and was on his way home, it occurred to him that whatever knowledge she had withheld from him to-day as a stranger, she might possibly impart at some future time, when she had learnt to regard him as her benefactor and friend.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SHAFTO JEBB IS SENT FOR.

JANE BARNARD went back to Highclere sorely depressed by the failure of her mission. Her chief hope had been in the counsel who had defended her father, and whose defence had hinted at a knowledge of suspicious facts bearing on the murder. To find him as ignorant as herself was a sore disappointment.

Her next endeavour must be to discover whether Shafto Jebb, who had furnished the hint on which Mr. Tomplin had framed his cross-examination of Sir Everard Courtenay, knew any more than he had pretended to know that evening in the coffee-room at the 'Peacock.' A man of that kind might know a good deal, and, in his self-importance, hint at secrets which he dared not betray, lest in so doing he should hazard his professional position. Or he might know nothing, and from sheer boastfulness pretend to the possession of some terrible secret.

'There was an old Dr. Jebb at Austhorpe that poor mother used to go to for medicine,' reflected Jane. 'I wonder whether this one is his son? I might go and see him about the pain in my shoulder.'

She went to bed that night in very low spirits. This business of clearing her father's name, which she had undertaken with so much energy and determination, began to seem hopeless. The poor old father was lying in Portland prison, a condemned murderer. Pentonville and Millbank had both been full at the time of his respite, so he had been drafted straight to Portland. The mystery of Walter Blake's death was explained to the satisfaction of everybody. How was she, a friendless woman, to induce the world to reverse the sentence that had been passed upon a self-accused criminal?

And now, being an economical little woman, Mrs. Barnard began to worry herself about the money she was wasting upon this seemingly hopeless enterprise. She had spent thirty pounds already out of the fifty which her husband had given her when she left home. She had crossed in a Cunard steamer in the hope of being in time for the trial; but she had insisted, much against her husband's wish, on coming as a second-class passenger.

'It'll be comfortable enough for me,' she said when he remonstrated with her. 'I don't mind roughing it. I came over in an emigrant ship, you know, dear, and was seven weeks on the sea. What should I do among a lot of simpering saloon passengers, thinking of nothing but eating and drinking and dressing? I'd rather be among homely people who have got their troubles, and are obliged to be careful of their money.'

The same desire to spare her husband's purse had influenced Mrs. Barnard in her choice of the second-floor bedroom over a tobacconist's, in one of the narrowest streets in Highclere. For this attic chamber, which was neat and clean and airy, she gave the large sum of four shillings a week, in which rent was included the right to boil her kettle or cook a chop, or a steak, or a rasher on the kitchen fire. She lived as such unselfish women can live, on tea and bread and butter, with such inexpensive relishes or substitutes for dinner as her fancy suggested. At

this rate of expenditure the twenty pounds in hand would last a long time. Yet Jane Barnard had an uneasy sense of wasting her husband's hardly-earned money, and she had already asked her landlady to try to get her some plain needlework to do.

Disheartened as she was by the result of her journey to London, she wrote to her husband in a hopeful strain, lest he too should lose heart and insist on her immediate return. He had been opposed to her coming, and it had been only her intense desire that had prevailed over his dislike to the journey. To own herself baffled and beaten would be too painful to Jane Barnard's proud spirit; for this little woman, who had been reared and educated in a workhouse, and had graduated in the rough school of domestic service, was gifted with an indomitable spirit, and a mind not to be ruled by time or space.

About a week after her interview with Mr. Tomplin, she walked over to Austhorpe one mild gray afternoon, passing with a shudder by the pollard oak, and Blatchmardean copse.

Austhorpe looked the quietest place in the universe on this winter afternoon. The south-west wind had breathed across the frosty fields, and melted the snow of last week, save here and there where it lay white under a hedge, or on a northward-facing bank. The scattered cottages, set far apart on the wide high road leading to nowhere, stood out sharply against the sunless afternoon sky. The old church stood afar off among its tombstones, surrounded with level meadows, where the cattle grazed complacently, unconscious of any ecclesiastical influence.

Before inquiring for Mr. Jebb's surgery, Mrs. Barnard went to look at Fairview, the one important house in the village. The lodge gate was shut, so she walked along the path by the park paling which bounded the grounds, to get a glimpse at the mansion as she best might. It was so shut in by a fine belt of timber that she had to walk a good way before she came to the point at which the house was visible from the road. Then, looking at the old Tudor mansion through a break in the trees, Jane Barnard saw all the windows closely shuttered, as if the house were empty. The sight moved her curiously. Did it mean absence—or death? She was so eager to know this, that she ran back to the lodge entrance as fast as her feet could carry her. She rang the bell, and was answered, after an interval of some minutes, by a lodge keeper, who looked indignant at being disturbed in his afternoon nap.

'Are the family away?' she asked.

'Yes. You ought to know that by the look o' the place, and not come startling folks, pulling that there bell like mad. What do you want?'

'I wished to see Sir Everard Courtenay.'

'Well, you're just three days too late. Sir Everard and Miss

Courtenay left three days ago for the south of France, and maybe they're going to Alljeers.'

'Wasn't it very sudden?'

'Well, it was sudden, if you must needs know. Sir Everard went away for his health. Our winter is too cold for him. Perhaps you'd better go up to the house and state your business to the housekeeper, and she'll let Sir Everard know about it when she sends him his letters, if it's anything particular.'

'No, it's not very particular. I'll wait till he comes home. Does he go abroad every winter?'

'He has been away travelling of an autumn pretty often. But this is the first winter he has gone abroad.'

'Good afternoon,' said Jane, whereupon the man stared at her through the rails of the gate, gave her a surly nod, and went back to finish his nap.

'This looks like running away,' thought Mrs. Barnard. 'Why should he go abroad this winter above every other winter? I wonder whether it was Mr. Jebb who recommended him to go on account of his health?'

She now set herself to discover the village surgeon's abode. It was in a lane that ran at right angles with the broad village street, not far from the 'Three Sugar-Loaves,' and within the shadow of school-house and church. It was not a bad old house, but it had been sorely neglected for the last half-century. In its palmy days it had been the habitation of a prosperous farmer; but with the advance of enlightenment the farmer had taken it into his head that the old Homestead was not good enough for him, and had built himself a lordly dwelling-house in a better situation, whereupon the Homestead had been rented by old Dr. Jebb, and from that time forward had sunk gradually to decay. All that Dr. Jebb's profession had ever done for him had been to feed and clothe himself and his numerous offspring, until those fledgelings were old enough to be flung out of the family nest, and pick up their own subsistence in the highways and byways of life. On the death of the original Jebb—who, without having taken the superior degree, had been always called doctor—his practice had descended to his eldest son, together with the household furniture, and the pestles, mortars and gallipots in the surgery; and on the strength of this inheritance the jovial Shafto had married, and filled the shabby, worn-out old house with a progeny as numerous as the previous generation which had occupied it. He was a man who took life lightly, and though Mrs. Jebb had aspirations after better things, in the shape of paint and paper, curtains and carpets, the surgeon opined that what had been good enough for his father and mother was good enough for him: a comforting doctrine to a man who never had any spare cash wherewith to improve and embellish his surroundings.

'It's very dreadful,' sighed poor Mrs. Jebb. 'The rain comes in through the nursery ceiling to such an extent that I expect to get up some morning and find those poor children drowned in their beds. I always have to put an umbrella up over Percy's crib in stormy weather; and as for the stable, the roof is in such a weak state that I do believe it will tumble down and bury the gray mare some day, while you're out of the way.'

'The stable does want a little repair, certainly,' said Shafto, who was more careful of the mare than of his children. He expected them to grow and thrive, as he had grown and thriven, like the birds of the air.

The house had a certain air of homely comfort, in spite of its shabbiness and dilapidation. The Jebbs lived on the fat of the land, and kept good fires, and were altogether inclined to take life pleasantly. They were hospitable to a ridiculous degree—in the idea of their less liberal neighbours, the Uphams, for instance, who entertained their friends with a formal dinner two or three times a year, and never gave meat or drink to anybody between whiles. Mrs. Jebb was a meek, motherly woman, who was always cooking when she was not mending, and who considered Shafto one of the greatest men of his age, on an intellectual level with Gladstone and Disraeli, only Fate had hindered his coming to the front. She was too meek of spirit to give utterance to this opinion to any one except her own children; but to them she asserted the fact dogmatically.

'If your father had only had an opening, he would have been Prime Minister before now,' she told them.

Meek as Mrs. Jebb was, she was frequently involved in difficulties and discordances with her servants. She could only afford to keep two, and there was a great deal of work to be done by these two. Perhaps that difficulty might have been got over if Mrs. Jebb had not helped them. Her assistance turned the scale, and made war where peace might have been. It is a fact in domestic history, that servants never stay long in a house where the mistress helps in the work. Essayists of the male sex may write fiercely against the fashionable lady who reads a novel when she might be washing the breakfast-things; or who gads about to afternoon tea-drinkings when she should be helping to cook the dinner. The fact remains, that the only households of whose machinery the wheels go round smoothly, are the houses in which the mistress interferes in no overt manner with the duties of her servants.

Mrs. Jebb helped the domestics from morning till night, and in so doing she was continually behind the scenes, and saw a great many things which it would have been better for her to have left unseen, and deprived her servants of those stray scraps of liberty and leisure which would have sweetened toil and

bondage: the hour loitered away at the shifty dinner, with such comfortable gossip and idle laughter as make the best sauce to cold mutton; the half-hour at tea, with elbows on table, and saucer balanced on outspread hand; the friendly dropping in of sister or cousin; the love-letter written before supper;—Mrs. Jebb's servants found no such leisure moments or unobserved pleasures in their lives; and after two or three months' drudgery they discovered that the work was too heavy for them, and gave their mistress warning; at which Mrs. Jebb, although she was accustomed to the calamity, usually shed tears, and declared that she couldn't have believed this last Ann, or Jane, or Mary, would have turned out as ungrateful as the rest.

'The fact is, you're too kind to them,' said Shafto. 'You pamper and pet them till they don't know what they're doing. Why, it was only last summer I saw them eating cold salmon.'

'It was only the tail and the fins, Shafto. I made salmon cutlets of all the fish that was left, for your breakfast.'

'And very good those cutlets are,' said the surgeon. 'I think you fry fish better and better every day.'

'I take a pleasure in it,' answered Mrs. Jebb, with mild delight at her husband's compliment.

On this January afternoon, when Jane Barnard came to the Homestead, Mrs. Jebb was in her usual difficulty. Sarah, her nurse and confidential servant, had given warning, and the warning was to expire in a few days, yet Mrs. Jebb had found no substitute for the deserter.

'Don't throw out your dirty water before you're sure of clean,' said Shafto, who was fond of proverbs and aphorisms; but the dirty water had a will of its own, and had made up its mind to go, and there was no clean water forthcoming.

Emily Jebb had shed some furtive tears this afternoon, while she busied herself with the composition of a curry, a dish which her husband loved. He had his own views and theories as to the concoction of this savoury meat—he made his own curry-powder, and believed that he had discovered a mixture superior to anything that had ever been achieved by the Rajahs of Ind.

Mrs. Barnard knocked modestly at the surgery door, feeling that she had no right to approach the parish surgeon in his domestic character; but Mr. Jebb was miles away on his afternoon round, and the door was opened by his eldest daughter, a tall slip of a girl, in very short petticoats, who had been lying on the surgery rug, reading 'Robinson Crusoe.'

'Pa's not at home,' she said curtly. 'Ma is, if you want to see her. You haven't come about the nurse's place, have you?'

'No, miss. I wanted to consult your father about my health.'

'Pa will be at home to his dinner at six—we have tea and pa has dinner,' interjected Miss Jebb, who was of a communicative temper, and had an abrupt and somewhat breathless way of speaking. 'I thought you might have come after the nurse's situation.'

Mrs. Barnard looked thoughtful. She saw a possible opportunity in this suggestion.

'Is Mrs. Jebb in want of a nurse?' she asked.

'Yes, we want one dreadfully,' answered the eager girl, with youthful candour. 'Sally has behaved most ungratefully. We liked her so much, you know, and we were very good with her, except Ethie. Ethie has a bad temper, you know—she has broken chilblains, and ma says that's the reason—and Sally gave ma warning one day, all of a sudden, and she's going the day after to-morrow, and I shall have to nurse the baby and keep all the others quiet till we get a new nurse, and I hate the thought of it. Perhaps you know of some one who might suit ma?' speculated the damsel, staring at Mrs. Barnard with big round eyes.

'I think I do know of some one who might suit, for a short time, at any rate. Could I see your mamma?'

'Ma's busy in the kitchen, and I know she's doing something very particular,' answered Florence Jebb, to whose mind her father's dinner was among the leading facts in life; 'but I think she'd see you. Please come into the breakfast-room.'

The damsel left Robinson Crusoe sprawling wide open on the hearth-rug, in company with a lively kitten and a disabled doll, and led the way up a little stair into the breakfast-room.

It was breakfast-room, dinner, tea, and supper-room too, and smelt strongly of meals; but there was a cheery fire in the old-fashioned grate, there was a bright little copper kettle singing on the hob, there was a roomy, luxurious easy chair beside the fire ready for the surgeon, whose slippers lay in a snug corner close by. Altogether the room, shabby as it was, had a comfortable look, and even the sleek tabby cat stretched before the fire suggested the placid ease of home.

Here Mrs. Barnard waited while Miss Jebb went in quest of her mother.

'If I were to take the nurse's place for a month or so it would save me board and lodging, and I should be likely to hear all that Mr. Jebb had to tell,' Jane said to herself; 'and as to hard work, I don't mind that a bit.'

Mrs. Jebb came in, flushed with the heat of the fire, and the anxiety of a true artist.

'My daughter tells me you know of a nurse who might suit me,' she said.

'Yes, madam; I thought, if you wouldn't mind taking a person for a short time, while you are looking about you, as one

may say, I should be very glad of the situation myself. But I could hardly stay more than a month or six weeks. I came over from America on business, and I shall have to go back to my house and family in about that time.'

'You seem a very respectable person, and—well—yes,' hesitated Mrs. Jebb, who, being of a procrastinating temper, had delayed looking for a new nurse till the old one was on the eve of departure, and now knew not where to find one. 'Yes, I think perhaps we might manage—it would be a convenience for a time—and I should be able to suit myself better if I had leisure to look about me. Are you an American?'

'No, ma'am; I went out to America when I was nineteen, and married and settled there.'

'Does your husband approve of your being away from him?'

'Yes, ma'am. At least he doesn't mind it, knowing that I had important business in England. My business is not finished yet, or I should go back to him. I might have to ask for a day, perhaps, once or twice, while I was in your service.'

'Oh, you could have that, of course. I am always glad to oblige my servants, if they are obliging to me. You understand children, I suppose?'

'I was nursemaid before I was fifteen, ma'am; and I have brought up my own dear children.'

Various questions followed, as to whether the applicant could do plain needlework, a little dressmaking now and then, trim the children's bonnets, was willing to make herself generally useful, and so on.

'I can turn my hand to pretty well anything, ma'am, from trimming a bonnet to cooking a dinner; but I must tell you that I can't offer any reference, unless it is to the person in whose house I have lodged three weeks, and that's not a long character. I'm quite a stranger in England.'

'You look very respectable,' said Mrs. Jebb meditatively. 'I don't think I should mind running the risk. But Mr. Jebb mustn't know it. He's so very particular.'

It is always well to hold up one member of the family as an embodied code of law, severe as that of Mede and Persian. Shafto Jebb was one of the easiest of men, save in matters of meat and drink; but Mrs. Jebb had a diplomatic way of talking of him as if he were a tyrant of unappeasable ferocity.

So it was settled that Mrs. Barnard should come to the Homestead with bag and baggage next evening, by which time Sarah the deserter would have gone forth to seek her fortune elsewhere, and the nursery would have been scrubbed and dusted in honour of the new-comer.

'I hope you'll take to the children,' said Mrs. Jebb. 'They're rather self-willed, but they have warm, loving hearts.'

'I'm not afraid, ma'am. I can always get on with children.'

'You haven't told me your name.'

'Barnard, ma'am. Jane Barnard.'

Mrs. Barnard went back to Highclere, well pleased with her afternoon's work. To live at Austhorpe, in domestic service, unobserved, unsuspected, as an unemployed stranger might be, would give her excellent opportunities of finding out much that she wanted to know. If there were any dark secret in the past life of Sir Everard Courtenay she would be likely to get some inkling of it here, where his life had been spent, where he was the one important person in the place, and must needs have been always the object of closest scrutiny. Tangley, too, was very near, and she would be able to know what course Morton Blake was taking. Then, again, the idea of spending a few weeks near the place of her birth was pleasant to her, anxious as she was to accomplish her mission, and to go back to her husband and children. Thus it was with a cheerful spirit that she took up her abode in Mr. Jebb's household.

She found the habits of the surgeon's family peculiarly favourable to her object. The general usefulness to which she had pledged herself included waiting at table while Mr. Jebb dined; and as the jovial surgeon was loquacious at his meals, and was one of those reckless, blustering talkers who rarely pause to consider what heed the listeners may be taking of their talk, Jane Barnard was in a fair way to hear his real opinions upon all subjects.

It was Mr. Jebb's custom to dine surrounded by his olive-branches, every one of whom, down to the cantankerous baby, he honestly loved; but this family gathering did not prevent the bread-winner dining daintily, and on exclusive fare. His little dinner was distinct and separate from the general meal. Wife and children dined at one o'clock; and for them the evening banquet was a compromise between tea and supper. Mrs. Jebb managed the tea-tray at one end of the table, while the other end was neatly set forth with Mr. Jebb's particular bottled ale, his plate of soup, his little bit of fish, his curry, or bird, or sweetbread to follow. He was a man who boasted that he wanted very little; and who frankly owned that he required that little to be of the best quality. Mrs. Jebb had made it the study of her life to satisfy her lord, and she had no haunting idea that her existence had been wasted because its chief occupation had been in the kitchen. The children made their evening meal of such savoury odds and ends as a careful housekeeper could afford to give them, eked out by bread and jam, a homely plum cake, of satisfying solidity, water-cresses, or the occasional shrimp.

'What sort of a day have you had, Shafto?' asked Mrs.

Jebb, one February evening, when her lord had approved her last intellectual effort, in the shape of a filleted sole with mushroom sauce.

'So, so. Sir Nathaniel sent for me this morning. The election has put him off his feed—too much excitement for an old one like him—though there's plenty of pace in the old fellow yet. I gave him a ball and threw him out of work for a day or two.'

Shafto had a way of speaking of his patients as if they were horses, to which his wife and family were accustomed.

'No talk of Sir Everard and Miss Courtenay's return, I suppose?' said Mrs. Jebb.

'Not likely. If he went abroad for his health he ought not to come back till May.'

'If he went for his health—why, of course that was the reason he went, wasn't it?' asked Mrs. Jebb, her curiosity aroused by that significant 'if.'

'Well, I don't know. One can't always get at a man's real meaning. The whole thing was so sudden. I never heard Sir Everard complain. He seemed dull and out of spirits sometimes, and was fonder of sitting by the fire in his library poring over stupid old books than a healthy middle-aged man ought to be. But I never knew there was anything amiss with him. Yet I'm supposed to be the family doctor. And one fine morning he rushes up to London, sees a physician, and comes home and says he has been ordered to the south of Europe—or Algiers even—on account of his lungs. I call it an insult to his local adviser to act in such a way. But there's more behind it all than anybody knows.'

'What can there be?' asked Mrs. Jebb, leaning over her tea-tray and looking intently at her husband, as he coquetted with the last morsel of his sweetbread, and mopped up the gravy with a bit of bread.

'My dear, I'm not going to talk,' said Mr. Jebb; and then for once in a way he appeared to be conscious that the youthful mind is not a stranger to curiosity, for he glanced at the clustering heads of his household gathered about a dish of 'winkles,' and murmured, 'Little pitchers—you know, my dear.' The nurse was standing at the sideboard cutting bread and butter, and of her presence neither Mr. Jebb nor his wife took any heed. As a stranger from the other side of the Atlantic she could have no possible interest in local gossip.

'Tell me by-and-by, dear,' said Mrs. Jebb meekly.

Whenever Shafto said he was not going to talk, it was a sure sign that he was longing to impart his ideas to a sympathetic mind.

Mrs. Jebb occupied herself in filling the cups which her

children thrust into the tea-tray, each clamorous to have his or her claim allowed.

'I've only had one cup, ma,' remonstrated Florence. 'Percy has had two ; and I believe Algie has had three.'

'That's another of Flo's crumpers,' cried Algernon, with his mouth full, and his chin anointed with jam, like a classical comedian smeared with the lees of wine. 'What do you expect will happen to you if you tell such out-and-outers as that?'

'If I stuffed myself with strawberry jam on the top of winkles to the extent you do, I should expect to have a fit,' retorted Florence.

Jane Barnard laid a soothing hand on Flo's sharp shoulder, and offered her a tempting crust from the new loaf.

'You're disturbing your pa and ma, dear,' she whispered. 'I'll take care you get a good cup of tea.'

Mrs. Barnard had been at the Homestead three weeks, and had already acquired a great influence over the children, who were not altogether bad children, although they had been dragged up anyhow, and were scampish in their ideas and behaviour.

'I'll tell you what,' volunteered Mr. Jebb, leaning back in his chair and picking his teeth in a leisurely manner, as if it were the next best thing to dining. 'I don't mind going so far as to say that a certain marriage will never come off.'

'What marriage?'

'How dull you are, Emily! M. B. and D. C., of course.'

'What, Dulcie? Dulcie not marry Morton?' cried Mrs. Jebb. 'Why, it would break both of their hearts. I've seen them together times and often, you know, Shafto, for she always asks me to tea when I call upon her, and she always returns my call. And though it's a great effort to put on one's best gown and bonnet and go out like a lady to pay a visit, I like to do it now and then, because it reminds me that I *am* a lady, however I may slave at the house-work.'

'I call it fiddle-faddle,' interjected the surgeon contemptuously. 'If you go out you should go for a good country walk. That would freshen you up a bit.'

'Not half so much as a nice cup of tea and a little friendly talk in Miss Courtenay's pretty morning-room. Everything is so elegant there—the books, the china, the furniture. I feel as if I were in a new world. And oh, Shafto, I'm sure they adore each other ; and if the marriage were to be broken off I believe it would be the death of her.'

'"Men have died and worms have eaten them, but not for love,"' quoted Shafto, who had picked up a score or so of Shakespearian saws from other people, and passed for a Shakespearian scholar without ever having read so much as a single

scene in a single play. 'I should be very sorry if the young lady were to fret. I vaccinated her, and I've attended her ever since Sir Everard brought her back to Fairview—measles, scarlatina, chicken-pox, whooping-cough—I've brought her through them all beautifully,—so you can't suppose I'm not interested in her welfare. Still I say that marriage will never come off. There's an antagonism between the two men, Sir E. and M. B. They may smother it for a time, but sooner or later it will break out in a big blaze, like a fire that has been ever so long smouldering. I saw M.'s face the day of the trial—saw him watch Sir E. while the prisoner's counsel was cross-examining him, and there was mischief in it. Yes, Mrs. Jebb, there was mischief. That marriage will never come off, or if it does there'll be misery for somebody. I've seen what domestic misery means—silent—secret. A beautiful home—every luxury that wealth can buy—a position in the county—youth—beauty—pride of race. But the trail of the serpent was over it all. That's where it is, Mrs. Jebb. The trail was there—the slimy, silvery track that showed where the snake had been.'

The cook, an unusual apparition in that room, burst suddenly in, breathless, her cap half blown off her head.

'Please, sir, you are to go to Tangley Manor directly minute. Mr. Blake's took ill, and the ladies think it's brain fever.'

'Didn't I say so?' exclaimed Mr. Jebb, looking at his wife with an air of gloomy triumph, as he put his toothpick in his pocket and rose to go.

And although he had said nothing of the kind, Mrs. Jebb looked upon him as a prophet.

CHAPTER XXIX.

WAS LIFE WORTH LIVING?

Morton Blake had told himself that it was best that he and Dulcie should be parted. He had made up his mind long ago that his chief duty in life was to avenge his father's death. The bringing home of his murdered father's body, that father from whom he had parted so blithely at the lodge gate in the gray autumn morning; the father whose strong arms had lifted him in front of the saddle for a few minutes' trot on the stout hunter; the father against whose broad chest his childish cheek had been lovingly laid for a parting hug before the firm, strong hand dropped him lightly upon the turf beside the open gate. The child, awakened by the confusion and horror of the household, had run down in his night-shirt, barefooted, to the hall, in time to see the corpse brought across the threshold. The impression

made by that awful scene upon a mind naturally intense and concentrative had become a part of the boy's being, and had strengthened as the years went by.

Thus it was that from the moment dark doubts of Sir Everard Courtenay entered his mind, Morton had been unhappy in his relations with Dulcie ; loving her with his heart and soul, yet feeling that to his love he was sacrificing duty. He had tried to stifle his doubts. He had prayed that he might become blind, rather than make any discovery which should alienate him from the girl he loved.

But her father had taken the initiative, and the tie which the lover could not have broken was sundered. He remembered now how strongly Sir Everard had opposed his suit in the first instance, and how he had only yielded when he saw that to be inflexible might be to break his daughter's heart. Was not this opposition, for which there was no ground in the social position or moral character of the lover, another link in the chain of evidence which Morton had been putting together, reluctantly, despairingly, knowing that the destruction of his own happiness must be the result, if that horrible suspicion which had slowly gathered strength in his mind should prove true ?

He had told himself that it was a good thing for his engagement to Dulcie to be broken ; but he had not known how deeply his love for her was rooted in his heart, or how empty of all delight his life would be without her. He had borne their temporary separation better than he had supposed he could have done ; simply because the work and excitement of the election had left him no time for thought. But now that the election was over, and that he had resigned himself to a life-long severance from Dulcie, he found how hard it was to exist without her. For some weeks after his interview with Lucy Green he lived as in a dreary dream, keeping himself aloof from his family, shutting himself in his study on pretence of business, and taking long, lonely walks after dark, when he was sure of meeting no one who knew him, and thus could avoid all that friendly every-day talk which jars so painfully upon a mind given over to one all-absorbing grief.

And now the natural result of such a life had overtaken him, and he was prostrate with a fever which was rather mental than physical, and which sorely puzzled that rough-and-ready practitioner, Mr. Shafto Jebb, though he was careful to conceal his perplexity from the anxious women at Tangley Manor. Morton had told no one that his engagement with Dulcie was ended. He had shrunk from the idea of being pitied and sympathized with, as he would have shrunk from physical torture. But his aunt shrewdly suspected the cause of his depression. She had of late observed that the post-bag had brought no letters from Dulcie,

nor conveyed Morton's customary budget for the foreign post. There was something wrong, evidently, thought tender-hearted Dora Blake; but when she tried, in the gentlest way, to approach the subject, Morton met her inquiries with such gloomy reserve that she dared not go further.

Prolonged sleeplessness, over-exertion in all kinds of bad weather, and an utter distaste for food, had brought him to such a state of weakness that he lay like a log; sometimes remaining for hours silent, apathetic, inert; at other times wildly delirious. The brain was evidently affected, but to what extent Shafto Jebb could not discover. Insomnia was the most difficult feature of the disease. Want of appetite might be overcome by the forcible administration of nourishment; but no opiate that Mr. Jebb tried could give sleep. Laudanum, morphia, and chloral were given vainly, or worse than vainly, for they excited and stimulated the brain which they were intended to soothe.

Dora Blake begged that a London physician, one of the most famous in the land, might be sent for; and Mr. Jebb consented to be enlightened by the highest scientific authority; but when the great authority appeared he had very little to communicate in return for his large fee. He assured Miss Blake that Mr. Jebb had been treating the patient with the utmost discretion. The chloral had been perhaps tried a little too persistently, seeing that the effect had been injurious rather than beneficial. The patient's mind had evidently been greatly distressed. There had been some disturbing cause at work, possibly for some time. Perfect repose was absolutely necessary: and the patient's constitution, which had sunk to a very low point under the mental strain, must be built up again. The great authority made a strong point of this rebuilding of the constitution. The issue of the case would depend upon care and nursing rather than upon active medical treatment, he said. From what he had the pleasure of knowing of Mr. Jebb—he had never heard of the man's existence until the previous day—he was sure that gentleman would exercise unremitting watchfulness until a happy result was obtained. If it should be deemed advisable for him to see the patient again, say in about a week or ten days, no marked improvement having taken place meanwhile, he would be happy to come; but, as Mr. Jebb was well aware, his practice was of a nature which made such journeys difficult.

The physician took a little of the luncheon which had been prepared for him, and then went back to the carriage which was waiting to convey him to Highclere station. He had brought very little comfort to Dora Blake's mind, beyond the assurance that Mr. Jebb was doing what was right, the case being precisely one of those in which hardly anything can be done.

She went back to the darkened room where Morton lay

tormented with delirious fancies: now arguing with his electors; now in court at the trial of Humphrey Vargas; now at a college wine party, disputing about some passage in Horace; now raving about Dulcie; always incoherent and disjointed in his talk. While his aunt was engaged with the physician he had not been alone. The rule of the household was that he should never be left. His dressing-room had been appropriated to the preparation of nourishment, and here his old nurse, now a useful servant in the household, kept watch over stewpans of beef tea, and jars of invalid turtle, jelly, arrowroot, and other spoon food which was forced at intervals upon the unwilling patient. Here too were kept medicine bottles and all the litter of a sick room, leaving Morton's own comfortable chamber cool and neat and airy. Lizzie Hardman was sitting at work near the one window which was not curtained. She was an excellent nurse, quiet yet quick, watchful but never demonstrative. She did not argue with the patient in his delirium, or try to rouse him when he lay mute and motionless, with dull eyes staring at the wall. Whatever anxiety she might feel, she had always the same placid manner in the sick room, moving with the lightest step, and with soft garments that never flapped or rustled: whereas both Tiny and Horatia seemed all ribbons and flounces, and were more restless than the patient himself—now bending over him to offer him lemonade when he had not the least inclination to drink, anon dabbing his forehead with eau de Cologne when the chief desire of his enfeebled mind was to be let alone, and the lightest touch of a strong, healthy hand was like a blow from a blacksmith's hammer.

'I am sure you must be tired, Lizzie,' said Dora, in her low, gentle voice, looking down at her *protégée* as she sat working a counterpane in crewels, a labour which promised to last as long as Penelope's, but to show a brilliant result when finished. 'You have been sitting here since six this morning.'

'I am not at all tired, dear auntie, but I insist upon your going to lie down. You were up all night.'

'I feel too uneasy to sleep, Lizzie. What is the use of lying down?'

'You will be resting, at any rate. And you really must try to sleep, or we shall have you as ill as poor Morton. Was the London doctor very hopeful?'

Lizzie did not look up from her work as she asked the question, but her sensitive lips trembled a little, and her face was pale with anxiety.

'Yes, he seems to think the dear boy's recovery is only a matter of time and care. We are to be very watchful. The patient is extremely weak. That's where the peril lies. Has he taken his turtle soup?'

'Only a spoonful or two. He has such a dislike to that, and indeed to almost everything. Poor old nurse is in despair.'

For several weeks Morton remained in this state, the delirium and sleeplessness continuing. The London physician was summoned again, and on this second occasion was less hopeful. Shafto Jebb went on in his jog-trot way, feeling the patient's pulse three times a day, and urging the administration of nourishment which the patient refused to take.

In all that weary time Morton had been nursed by the women of his household. Mr. Jebb had suggested a professional nurse, but Miss Blake had set her face against hireling help. There was old Rebecca, who had nursed Walter Blake and his children after him, and had lived at Tangley ever since the estate had belonged to the Blake family, ready and willing to watch the patient by day and night, were it needful, and skilled in all the arts of sick nursing. There was Miss Blake herself; and lastly there was Lizzie Hardman, the cleverest and quietest of nurses a sick man could desire.

Throughout the long period of his delirium Morton had seemed to feel comfort in Lizzie's presence. He had turned to her rather than to his aunt, as if her hand and voice had a more soothing power.

One evening towards the end of April, when Miss Blake had gone to her room, fairly worn out with anxiety, and when old Rebecca was dozing over her pipkins and tea-kettle by the fire in the dressing-room, Lizzie sat alone at her needlework by Morton's bed, while he lay looking at the wall, apathetic, silent, the image of despair.

The tears were slowly streaming down Lizzie's cheeks as she sat there, a quiet figure, seemingly absorbed in womanly work. To-day Mr. Jebb had for the first time confessed himself uneasy as to the result of Morton's illness. The young man's strength was ebbing day by day, and that recuperative effort which the surgeon had expected from nature had not yet been made.

'Unless he makes a desperate rally within the next few days I'm afraid we shall lose him,' said the surgeon.

Lizzie had heard this, and she sat by her old playfellow's bed, praying silently, while the slow tears stole down her pale cheeks, wan with long watching.

She had been thinking what could be done to save him, as he lay there helpless, hopeless, dying. She and Aunt Dora had spent many a sad hour in talking of him and speculating about him during that dismal time, and they had come to the conclusion that some breach with Dulcie was at the root of this illness. How the severance had arisen neither Miss Blake nor Lizzie could imagine, but that the tie had been broken they both felt convinced, knowing no way else to account for Morton's despair.

To-day Lizzie had heard news that had startled her, and she was now meditating upon a desperate step.

'I would do anything to save his life,' she said to herself,—'anything.' And then she looked at the haggard face, the wild eyes staring at vacancy, and her heart sank within her. Must he pass from madness to death? Would that be the end of his bright young life, so full of promise, of power, and energy for all good deeds?

Throughout his illness he had seemed to understand her better than he understood any one else, to talk more rationally to her than to others.

Presently she knelt beside the bed, and took his wasted hand in hers, and spoke to him in a low, grave voice, slowly and deliberately.

'Would you like to see Dulcie?'

The wild eyes fixed themselves suddenly upon the questioner's face. The name acted like a spell. It was the first time that name had been pronounced in Morton's hearing since the beginning of his illness.

His burning hand clutched Lizzie Hardman's wrist, his eager eyes scrutinized her face.

'You are making a fool of me,' he said angrily. 'You think I am mad and that you can cheat me, but you can't. Dulcie is in Algeria.'

'She is at Fairview. If you will promise to be a more obedient patient, and to do all the doctor tells you, I will bring her to see you within the next twenty-four hours.'

'Has she come back? Are you sure of that?'

'She came back this afternoon. Sir Everard has been ill—is very ill now, I believe—and he had a fancy for coming back to Fairview. If you will do all I ask you, if you will exercise self-command, and try to get better, I will bring her to see you to-morrow evening.'

'She would not come. She and I are parted for ever. There is a reason—a horrible reason—why she can never be my wife.'

Lizzie thought that this was mere raving—one of the hallucinations of fever.

'She will come to see you when she knows you are ill. You may have quarrelled, but she cannot have ceased altogether to care for you since last Christmas. I saw you together then, remember, and I know there was love enough and to spare on both sides.'

'Love is not all in this world,' said Morton moodily.

And then, after a silence of some minutes, he asked:—

'Has she really come home? You never told me a lie, Lizzie, yet I'm afraid to trust you. When a man is ill and off his head he is treated like a child—everybody fools him. Has Dulcie come back?'

'She has, upon my honour.'

'Then I will eat anything—drink anything—endure anything—only to see her dear face—only to clasp her hand.'

He took a few spoonfuls of egg and brandy, and a little invalid turtle between that time and midnight; and, lulled and comforted by the hope of seeing Dulcie, he slept for an hour or so in the night, Lizzie watching by him till the bright spring dawn, while Miss Blake slept the sleep of bodily and mental exhaustion.

CHAPTER XXX.

WHO CAN MINISTER TO A MIND DISEASED?

Sir Everard Courtenay had returned to his own house a greater invalid than when he left it. He had tried one spot after another upon the shores of the Mediterranean; he had crossed to Algiers; he had visited the monastery of La Trappe, where he was curiously interested in the inscriptions on the walls, and where he made inquiries as to the mode of life in that living tomb. But no advantages of southern climate, no fresh sea breezes could bring vigour to his frame, or brightness to his eye; nor did frequent change of scene, with all the varying incidents of travel, dispel the settled gloom that hung over his spirits.

One day, he told his daughter suddenly that he was going to take her home by easy stages, through Italy and the Mont Cenis tunnel.

'I want to set my house in order before I die,' he said.

'Dear father, why do you talk like that?' exclaimed Dulcie, clinging to him tenderly. 'You are better, are you not?'

'Do you think I am better, Dulcie?' he asked, looking at her with grave, questioning eyes.

'I hoped that the milder climate, the change from place to place——' faltered Dulcie.

'Would prolong my life. Yes, that is just what the London doctor hoped—or made believe to hope. Yet I find this miserable frame of mine no stronger because I have dragged it all along the southern coast. I find no more delight in life under African skies than in the quiet lanes round Austhorpe. But we will not stop long at Fairview—you would not like it perhaps, now——'

'I should be very miserable there,' said Dulcie, her eyes filling with tears.

'My pet, my darling, you shall not stay. If you would like

me to leave you in Florence, I could come back to you in a few weeks. I have friends there who would take charge of you.'

'No, papa, I will not be parted from you. The duty, the only delight of my life is to be with you!'

They sailed for Naples next morning and travelled at a leisurely pace through Italy, seeing all that was worth seeing between Naples and Turin, Sir Everard hoping that Dulcie's mind might be diverted by the variety of scenes through which she passed. But neither Africa nor Italy, with all their romantic associations, had power over Dulcie's mind, or could make her forget Morton Blake and the happy, simple life at Fairview, before the beginning of sorrow. And now they had bent their steps homeward Morton was continually in her mind. She was wondering what she should hear of him when she returned. Perhaps people would tell her that he was engaged to Lady Frances Grange, and she would have to endure their sympathy on account of his fickleness. In any case she would have to bear a great deal. Everybody would be astonished at the rupture of an engagement which had been an established fact in the village, a fact known to the smallest urchin at the parish schools.

'I hope he does care for Lady Frances,' she said to herself sadly. 'Anything would be better than the idea that I had made his life unhappy.'

Yet she could not picture him to herself as Fanny Grange's lover without a bitter pang of jealousy.

They reached Fairview late in the afternoon, weary with the journey from Turin, whence they had travelled with only a few hours' rest in Paris. There were only servants to receive them, and Dulcie would have died rather than ask any questions about Morton. Sir Everard heard of Morton's illness from Philip Stanton within an hour of his return, and he at once warned Dulcie's maid, Emma Pew, to say not one word to her mistress on the subject.

'Miss Courtenay is so tender-hearted,' said Sir Everard, that, although everything is at an end between her and Mr. Blake, she would make herself unhappy if she knew of his illness.'

'But they say the doctors have given him over, sir. If he dies my mistress is sure to hear of it.'

'No doubt some officious fool will make haste to give her the information. But, in the meantime, it is better she should know nothing.'

Sir Everard ordered his phaeton soon after breakfast next day, and drove alone to Blatchmardean Castle, where he had a mission to fulfil. He had been thinking much of his daughter and his daughter's happiness, since they had started on the long homeward journey. It had been his unhappy fate to come be-

tween her and the man to whom she had given her fresh young heart, and he was now eager to devise some means by which she might be beguiled into finding new gladness and delight in life.

'She is so young and childlike—so full of freshness and simplicity. Surely all her capacity for loving cannot be exhausted by this one girlish attachment,' he argued with himself. 'I think I know of some one who could love her as truly as ever Morton Blake loved her, if she would but give him fair play.'

This idea had been more or less in his mind ever since the cancelment of Dulcie's engagement, and this was his chief purpose in coming back to Fairview.

He had seen Lord Beville and Dulcie together, and he had seen enough to convince him that Beville would have gladly taken Morton's place.

He had talked to Beville of his daughter's engagement on one occasion, and the young man, naturally frank and outspoken, had made no secret of his warm admiration of Dulcie. Sir Everard had observed him the night they all dined together at Aspinall Towers, and what he had seen then had confirmed him in his idea that Beville was capable of a warm and lasting attachment, light and careless though the young man's nature seemed.

And now it was Sir Everard's most ardent desire to see his daughter married—to see her married to a man who would honour and cherish her—but not to Morton Blake, staunch and true though Morton Blake was.

'If Beville could only win her I should die happy,' he said to himself, having made up his mind that for him death was not far off. 'If I could see her an honoured wife, the mistress of a fine old ancestral home, surrounded by new ties, new friends, new interests, and protected by a devoted and chivalrous husband, I should go my way in peace ; but to leave her without a friend in the world, robbed by my act of her chosen lover, depending upon me alone for love and protection, that is too bitter.'

It was a bright spring morning, and the hawthorns in Blatchmardean Park were all bursting into leaf, the larches showed green against a background of Scotch firs, and the chestnut buds were opening on the sunward side of the trees. Sir Everard looked about him thoughtfully as he drove through the park. He had looked of late upon scenes of striking loveliness, mountain and sea, fertile valley and wide winding river, classic city and time-honoured cathedral : yet this simple English beauty of wood and meadow seemed to him fairer and sweeter than the richer growth of a more luxuriant nature, and touched him nearer than the glory of historic cities. Amidst such simple surroundings he had been born and bred,

and his joys and sorrows were all associated with the little world within a twenty mile radius of Highclere.

At the castle he asked to see Lady Frances Grange. He was told that she was in the garden, and while the white-haired old butler was giving him this information Miss Moulton came out of the little drawing-room, where she had been filling old Japanese bowls with ferns and daffodils, and was loud in her astonishment at seeing him.

'Sir Everard! This is a surprise. We all thought you were in Algeria. I hope you have benefited by the change. But you are not looking as well as your friends would wish to see you.'

'We came from Turin very rapidly, and I am a little tired with the journey. Is your pupil to be seen this morning, Miss Moulton? I know I am unconscionably early, but I have come to ask Lady Frances a favour.'

'I am sure she will be pleased to see you. She is roaming about the gardens, I believe—in the wilderness, perhaps. That is her favourite resort on a fine morning. Shall I go with you, or will you try to find her for yourself?'

'I won't trouble you. I think I shall be able to find her,' answered Sir Everard courteously; 'and when I have told her what I want her to do for me I will come back and ask your aid in the matter.'

He went across the broad gravel sweep in front of the castle and away to the wilderness, which skirted one side of the park, screening kitchen gardens and stables from the eye of the stranger.

Miss Moulton watched his retreating figure with friendly interest.

'What a fine-looking man he is, and how nobly he carries himself!' she thought. 'If I were a girl, that is just the kind of man I should fall in love with, though he is nearer fifty than forty. But it is a pity he always has that unhappy look, like a man borne down by the weight of secret care. I put it all down to hypochondria. When a man has a handsome income and nothing in the world to trouble him, he takes to reading medical books, and imagines himself the victim of some obscure disease. If God doesn't give us real troubles to bear, we tax our poor little minds to invent sham ones.'

Providence, which had not been lavish in its favours to Sarah Moulton, had given her at least the comfort of adversity's sweet milk, philosophy. She was always ready to philosophize upon any turn of fortune, and her philosophy was happily of the bright and cheerful order, tending to make the best of things, and ready to believe that other people's burdens were quite as big as—and often bigger than—her own. Out of this view of Fate came a contentedness and serenity of temper that made stout, homely-visaged Sarah Moulton delightful.

The wilderness was a pleasant place on a fine April morning, a land of yellow daffodils and blue periwinkle, overshadowed by larches and Scotch firs, with here a chestnut, and there a walnut, and anon a cluster of wild cherry trees, or a grand old beech, under which the never-to-be-heard-the-last-of Tityrus might have taken his rest. The ground was green with ivy, moss, and the feathery foliage of the wood anemone, save where last year's leaves lay in patches of ruddy brown. White anemone cups, veined with rose-colour, and bright blue dog-violets were dotted about amidst the greenery. A narrow sandy track, well trodden by Frances Grange and her dogs, meandered through the wilderness, and after following this footpath for some distance, Sir Everard found the young lady sitting on the rugged rootof an ancient oak, reading, with a red setter, a liver and white spaniel, and a veteran foxhound, long cast out of the pack, for her companions.

She started to her feet at sight of Sir Everard, and blushed rosy red with surprise, a glow of colour which gave new beauty to the clear nut-brown skin, and new lustre to the dark hazel eyes.

'I thought—we all thought you were in Algiers,' she exclaimed, as they shook hands.

'I left Algiers three weeks ago. I did not find myself gaining so much health or strength from my exile that it was worth while to keep my daughter any longer separated from all her friends—not that she has many friends, even at Austhorpe, poor child. We have lived too lonely a life for that.'

'I dare say she is very glad to come home?' answered Frances. 'She must have felt the separation from Morton. Was it not a terrible shock to her to find him so ill?'

'As yet she knows nothing of his illness."

'Indeed!'

'No. I want to spare her the pain of that knowledge if I can. To that end I kept back a letter which Dora Blake wrote to Dulcie while we were at Algiers, though Miss Blake, no doubt from consideration for my poor girl, affected to make light of Morton's illness.'

'Was it not rather cruel of you to keep Dulcie in the dark? And will it not make the blow harder for her to bear, if Morton should die?' asked Frances.

Her voice trembled a little as she spoke of this possibility.

'I hope not. I hope she will be resigned even to that sorrow. It could make the calamity no less were her mind to be prepared for it by the slow tortures of anticipation. I am going to be quite frank and open with you, Lady Frances, for I want to win your friendship, if possible your affection, for my motherless girl.'

'I have always been inclined to love her,' answered Frances, 'but I think she has held me a little at a distance, or we should have been more intimate than we are. Perhaps it was poor Morton's fault.'

'Mr. Blake will have no further influence upon my daughter's life. Her engagement has been broken at my desire.'

Frances paled a little at this shock.

'You cannot mean it,' she faltered.

'I do mean it. The thing has been done some time.'

'You will break both their hearts. Now I can understand the reason of Morton's strange illness. The doctors have said that mental distress was the cause. Yet his family could not imagine why he should be unhappy.'

'Hearts are not so easily broken,' said Sir Everard. 'I am sorry to hear of Morton's illness, but I should put it down to the fatigue and worry of the election, rather than to his regret at parting with Dulcie. She, who is all tenderness, has borne the separation with resignation. Possibly were she to hear of his illness, and imagine that the rupture with her had caused it, her peace of mind might be seriously disturbed, and this is what I am most anxious to avoid. And now, Lady Frances, I fling myself upon your generosity. I want you to help to heal my dear girl's wounded heart, and to guard it from fresh wounds. Will you come to Fairview and be a companion—a sister to her till the cloud has passed? I will do my utmost to make your visit pleasant to you; and if you would like Miss Moulton to come with you, Dulcie and I will be delighted to receive her.'

Frances looked thoughtful, wondering a little at this sudden confidence upon the part of Sir Everard. She had always liked him and admired him. The grave dignity of his manner, that thoughtfulness and reserve which made him so unlike the ordinary country squire, had impressed her with an idea of his superiority. He was her beau ideal of an intellectual man, a thinker and dreamer, as contrasted with that common rustic type of which she saw so much, the man who gives his mind to agriculture and field sports, and spends all his spare capital on steam ploughs and hunters. She was deeply flattered by his desire that she should be his daughter's friend.

'You take me by surprise, Sir Everard,' she faltered. 'I am inferior to Dulcie in almost everything. She is so accomplished and well-read. I am so hopelessly ignorant. My delight is in animals and out-door amusements; she loves her books and piano and the seclusion of her own rooms. How can I ever be a companion for her?'

'The very contrast between you will be good for both. If she can interest you in her books and various accomplishments, that bright intellect of yours will speedily make up for lost

time. And it will be highly advantageous for her health and spirits if you can interest her in living creatures and open-air amusements. She has lived too much indoors, and with the ideas of the dead for her chief companions. She has grown, like myself, too much of a dreamer and a thinker. I cannot infuse brightness and gaiety into her life, because my own life has long been darkened by the shadow of an unforgettable grief. But you can cheer and gladden her. You can teach her to look forward and backward.'

'Do you really wish me to try?' asked Frances, looking at him earnestly with bright, candid eyes.

'With all my heart.'

'Then I will come to Fairview at once; to-day, if you like.'

'You cannot come too soon.'

'Always supposing that papa and Miss Moulton are agreeable.'

'Will you not bring Miss Moulton?'

'I think not. She is a dear thing, but she had better stay at home and take care of the Sheik.'

'Is that his lordship?'

'Yes, Beville and I generally call him the Sheik. Will you come with me and see if we can find him? He seldom says no to any wish of mine—so it's almost a formula to ask—but still I always do ask. I like to show my reverence for authority. Gellert—Nellie—Sancho—go home.' This was addressed to the dogs, who scampered off through the underwood, leaving Sir Everard and Lady Frances to follow at their leisure.

CHAPTER XXXI.

'THAT WOULD BE TOO HORRIBLE.'

Lord Blatchmardean was discovered after some trouble in an upland field, contemplating the performance of a steam plough which had been lent him by a well-to-do tenant. He was surprised to see Sir Everard in company with Lady Frances, and was hearty in his congratulations on the baronet's return to his native soil.

'There's no place like old England after all,' said the earl; 'the smell of the newly-turned earth on a spring morning is better than all your southern climates and mineral waters. But you are not looking so well as I had hoped to see you after your travels, Sir Everard. You look fagged, sir, fagged! People will overdo it when they go abroad.'

'I have been giving my daughter a hurried view of Italy as

we came home,' answered Sir Everard, 'and I dare say we both worked a little too hard.'

'Sad news this about Morton Blake,' said the earl.

'Is he so very ill?'

'I'm afraid there's very little chance of his coming round again, from what Jebb told me yesterday. He won't eat, and he can't sleep, and about the only thing he seems able or inclined to do is to die. But perhaps now Miss Courtenay has come home, she may be able to mend matters?'

'I'm afraid not,' said Sir Everard, and then he explained what had happened between Morton and Dulcie, and made his request about Lady Frances.

'What! rob me of Fan! That's rather hard lines. Who's to sing to me of an evening, and who's to beat me at billiards, while she's away? I shall miss her dreadfully; but I dare say the change might do her good. Blatchmardean is a dull old hole for any girl to live in, and Fan has refused Lady Luffington's offer of another season in Clarges Street. She doesn't care for London society. Do you want to go to Fairview, Fan?'

'I should like to be with Dulcie for a few days, especially as she is in trouble,' replied Lady Frances.

'So be it then, Fan. Go and cheer her up a little. I'll ride over to-morrow morning and see how you take to the new pasture. Don't keep her too long, Sir Everard; she is the chief delight of an old man's life.'

'After steam ploughs and new varieties of mangel, papa. When am I to come, Sir Everard?'

'I should like to drive you home with me at once.'

'And Moulty can send my portmanteau after me. May I go, papa?'

'You may do what you always do, Fan, exactly what you like.'

'Best of Sheiks, adieu.'

She gave his lordship a hug, and then bounded lightly across the heavy ground, just as the steam plough came snorting and tugging towards her, as if maliciously intent upon running her down.

Miss Moulton was infinitely surprised when her pupil came rushing into the snug little morning-room where that indefatigable lady was at work darning house linen, to announce that she was going to start immediately on a few days' visit to Fairview.

Lady Frances and Miss Courtenay had been tolerably intimate for the last two years, but they had never stayed under each other's roofs, they had never exchanged confidences of any kind; and now it seemed strange that Frances should be eager to bear Dulcie company. As yet, Miss Moulton knew nothing

of the change that had taken place in Dulcie's relations with Morton.

'I am off this instant with Sir Everard. You and Betsy will pack my trunk, won't you, dear? You know what I shall want better than I know myself, because I always forget things. Good-bye, you dear old soul; take care of the *pater* and of your dearest self, though that is the last individual you ever think of.'

And so Frances rattled out of the room, took her neat little felt hat and warm jacket from their place in the hall, kissed her old governess half-a-dozen times, and then stepped lightly to her place in the high phaeton.

'I feel awfully grand,' she exclaimed, as they drove along the avenue. 'Papa never drives such a trap as this. He has only a rakish little Newport Pagnell, and the big family ark, which my grandfather and grandmother used to drive in—a chariot with lemon-coloured panels, and moth-eaten damask cushions. I believe it's rather a chosen resort for the Sheik's particular breed of cochin chinas, and that most of our eggs are laid there.'

Frances stole a look at her silent companion, blushing a little at her own loquacity. What a grave and thoughtful face it was, indicative of a self-contained nature—a mind which would jealously guard the secret of its joys and sorrows! It was a face full of interest for a youthful observer, for it was fraught with meanings that youth cannot fathom, and had all the charm of mystery.

Dulcie was surprised at her visitor's arrival, but received her with gentle courtesy. Of all companions her father could have chosen for her, perhaps Lady Frances Grange was the least welcome; not because of any objection that she had to Frances herself; but on account of her conviction that Morton had cared for Frances in the past and was very likely to care for her still more in the future.

Sir Everard went off to his library, and left the two girls together in Dulcie's morning-room. They were sitting side by side on the sofa, Dulcie's hands fidgeting nervously with a piece of crewel work, Frances watching her pale, sad face. The effort which she was continually making to appear cheerful in her father's presence, left her dull and apathetic when she was out of his sight.

'My dear Dulcie,' said Frances, putting her arm round the girl's slim waist, 'you are not looking so cheerful as I should wish.'

'I have not much reason to be cheerful,' Dulcie answered rather moodily. 'I suppose papa has told you that my engagement with Morton is broken?'

'He has told me, and I am infinitely surprised.'

'I wonder that you should be surprised,' said Dulcie.

'Indeed! but why should I not be surprised?'

'Because it struck me that you might have some clue to papa's reasons for wishing me to break the engagement.'

'Dulcie, what can you mean? Come, child, I am a very outspoken individual, not given to beating about bushes when I can go straight to a point. Has anybody led you to suppose that Morton has ever wavered in his constancy to you? Can you believe that he is capable of being false?'

'Falsehood is a hard word,' faltered Dulcie. 'No, I could never believe him capable of falsehood or meanness; but his feelings might undergo a change. He might find that he had been mistaken, that a sentiment which he had believed a lasting affection was only a passing fancy, and that his real love had been unconsciously given elsewhere.'

'You don't think that he ever cared for me, I hope,' said Frances bluntly.

'I have thought that it might be so.'

'Then you have been egregiously mistaken! What a foolish little thing you are! And was it for this idiotic reason you broke with him?'

'No. It was my dear father's wish that our engagement should come to an end. He refused to give me any reason: but I fancied, somehow, that he thought Morton cared more for you than for me.'

'You are an obedient daughter,' exclaimed Frances somewhat contemptuously. 'Then to gratify a whim of your father's you spoiled Morton's happiness and your own. I should like to see my dear old Sheik asking such a sacrifice from me, if I cared for any one as you must have cared for Morton.'

'My father is all the world to me,' said Dulcie tenderly. 'He and I have been all in all to each other ever since I was seven years old.'

'Then you never ought to have engaged yourself to Morton,' said Frances severely. And then she relented, and drew Dulcie's golden head on to her shoulder, and tenderly caressed the bright hair.

'My pet, I did not come here to scold you, but to comfort you,' she said lovingly, 'but it is always best to know what we are talking about. The idea of you being jealous of poor looked-down-upon me! Don't you know that Morton has always treated me with the sublime contempt with which young men generally regard their sisters? I have not a taste nor an inclination that is not discordant to him. He hates slang, and detests horsey girls; and I am both slangy and horsey. However, I have no doubt you did right in pleasing your father, who idolizes you, and I know that time will bring consolation for your grief at parting with poor Morton.'

'I don't believe I shall ever feel less sorry than I do to-day,' said Dulcie, with conviction.

'Oh, yes, you will; trust my experience for that. Women have a wonderful capacity for getting over a grief of that kind.'

'How do you know?'

'Because I had a little trouble of my own, once upon a time, and I think I have mastered it.'

'You are so brave and bright. Tell me all about it,' urged Dulcie, looking up at her affectionately.

She had never known what it was to have a companion and *confidante* of her own sex. Her only friend, her only adviser, had been her father. And now, for the first time in her life, she found that there was comfort in girlish sympathy and girlish friendship.

'No, dearest. It was all foolishness. I had rather not talk about it. The wound is not so completely healed that I can bear to touch it carelessly just yet. Let us talk about other things. What a sweet room this is—so bright and womanly—full of china and flowers, and all womanly things! And what a lovely piano!'

'That was a New Year's gift from papa'

'Privileged young person, to have a father with power and inclination to give such gifts. So far as inclination goes, my father would load me with benefits, but he never has any spare cash. What an interesting man Sir Everard is!'

'Is he not? I am so glad you like him. He is all goodness and thoughtfulness for others; yet people do not always understand, or even like him. He is too reserved in his manners to please everybody.'

'I don't care a straw for the kind of man who pleases everybody. That order of being would never interest me as your father does. He gives me the impression that he has known some great sorrow, and has never entirely recovered from the shock.'

'You have heard his story, have you not? It was my poor mother's sudden death which overshadowed his life. He wandered about, alone, upon the Continent for years, and it was only seven years after mamma's death that he brought me back to Fairview. I had been brought up by my aunt in Wales, and had not seen my father once during all that time. I think the very idea of me was hateful to him in those days. It was only later that he began to find out there was some comfort in having a daughter. From that time forward my chief duty has been to cheer and console him.'

'And to that duty you are willing to sacrifice your own happiness? Well, Dulcie, my dear, you are a good girl, and I will never incite you to rebellion.'

The two girls passed the morning together happily. Dulcie took Frances on a tour of exploration round the gardens and

stables and poultry yard, where everything was new to herself after nearly four months' absence. They looked at hothouses and greenhouses, and had long confabulations with the head gardener, who was a man of taste, and had always some small improvement to suggest to Miss Courtenay. Then came a ramble through the house, during which Dulcie chose the prettiest spare room for her visitor—a room with an old Tudor window wreathed with Australian clematis and yellow jessamine.

Then came luncheon, at which meal Sir Everard rarely appeared, so the two girls had the dining-room to themselves, and then Dulcie proposed a drive in her pony carriage.

'If you don't care about driving very much, I think I'd rather loaf about the garden with you, or hear you play Chopin on that delicious piano,' said Frances artfully.

'I don't care in the least about driving; I only want to amuse you.'

'Then let us stay at home by all means,' decided Frances.

She considered herself in some measure the guardian of Dulcie's peace. Sir Everard had told her that he wished to keep the knowledge of Morton's illness from his daughter. Were they to drive through the village they would be almost sure to meet Shafto Jebb, or Mr. Mawk, the curate, or some other gossip, who would inevitably condole with Dulcie about her lover's illness. The only safety was in keeping within the four walls of Fairview, where the servants had been warned to say not a word to their mistress.

They went back to the morning-room, and Frances seated herself in luxurious idleness on the fleecy white rug in front of the wood fire.

'Now play away to your heart's content, Dulcie dear, while I abandon myself to dreams of all that might have been, had life been utterly different. Even the most matter-of-fact people are sentimental once in a way, and Chopin always sets me dreaming.'

'What shall I play, Lady Frances?'

'If you call me Lady Frances I shall go home this afternoon. Call me Fan. It sounds rather like the name of an asthmatic Blenheim spaniel, but all the people who care for me call me by it.'

'Morton used to call you Fan, I remember,' said Dulcie.

'My dearest, Morton cares for me just as much as he cares for his horse or his dog. He is used to me. We have ridden, and danced, and played billiards together; and before he knew you Blatchmardean was the chosen resort of his idle hours.'

'Did you see much of him while we were away?' faltered Dulcie.

'Very little. He was busy with his election, don't you know?' answered Frances hurriedly, dreading lest the next question

should be an inquiry about Morton's health and spirits. 'I think, dearest, we had better not talk of him. It is only fostering your unhappiness.'

'Then I will play to you—and think of him,' answered Dulcie softly.

She played the saddest minor strains of her favourite composer, while Frances Grange sat looking at the burning logs and thinking what a tangled skein life was altogether. Why had Sir Everard insisted upon the rupture of an engagement which for nearly a year he had seemed to approve? The whole thing appeared arbitrary and unkind to the last degree.

'Yet I cannot believe him ungenerous or unkind,' she thought, remembering the grave beauty of that thoughtful face whose meaning she had so vainly tried to penetrate.

What a noble heart that must be which could be steadfast for twenty years to the memory of a lost love! How many men in Sir Everard's position would have married after a year or two of widowhood! These considerations gave the thoughtful recluse of fifty a curious interest in Frances Grange's mind.

Dulcie played for an hour or more, and then the two girls put on their hats and jackets, and wandered out into the garden again. It was a mild, sunshiny afternoon, and the view from the terrace looked lovely in the clear light. They walked up and down for some time talking, and they were just turning to go back to the house when Dulcie saw a figure approaching them along the avenue that led from the lodge gate.

'Surely it is Miss Hardman,' she exclaimed. 'What an odd thing for her to call alone!'

'You had better not see her,' said Frances hastily. 'Sir Everard would not like it.'

'Why should he mind? It can make no difference. Yes, I shall certainly see her. She is a dear, good, true-hearted girl. And I shall hear all about Morton and Aunt Dora. My auntie, I used to call her; thinking that she would be really my aunt before long. Oh, Fanny, I can't tell you how fond I am of her, or how good she has been to me. And now she must think me false and ungrateful.'

'Why should she think that? She must know that you only obey your father.'

'But she cannot tell what pain and grief that obedience cost me. She may think that I can throw Morton off without a pang. I dread meeting even Lizzie Hardman.'

'Then run indoors as fast as you can, and leave me to explain matters to her. She will easily understand that you don't care to meet any one from Tangley,' urged Frances, feeling that this was the last chance of warding off those evil tidings which Dulcie was sure to hear from Miss Hardman.

'No, I would not be uncivil to her for the world.'

Lizzie was close to them by this time. She held out her hand to Dulcie, but there was a coldness in her greeting quite unlike her old manner to Morton's betrothed.

'Of course, you have heard?' she said.

'Heard what? If it is about Morton you are talking I have heard nothing.'

'What, nobody has told you that he is at death's door—that for once in a way a broken heart is likely to prove fatal?'

Dulcie turned pale as death, and clung to Frances as if she would have fallen to the ground without her support.

'How cruel of you to bounce out your information upon her like that!' exclaimed Frances indignantly.

'Somebody must tell her the truth. She has been cruel to Morton. She has trifled with him and broken his heart. Why should she not be told that he is dying? It is no harder for her than for others.'

'Not dying,' gasped Dulcie. 'For God's sake don't say that he is dying.'

'He is so near death that it will need almost a miracle to save him. He was so fond of you that perhaps the very sight of you will bring him back to life. Will you come to him?'

'Yes,' answered Dulcie, without a thought of father or duty.

'Dulcie,' remonstrated Frances, feeling that her position was becoming momentarily more critical, 'you forget your promise to Sir Everard.'

'I promised my father that I would not marry Morton, not that I would not see him. I will come this instant, Lizzie. You must explain everything to papa, Fanny.'

'I would not face him in his anger for worlds. Dulcie, you must not do anything so rash,' remonstrated Frances.

'If you want to save his life, come at once,' pleaded Lizzie. 'I left the pony carriage at the lodge. You are dressed—come at once. I promised Morton he should see you to-day.'

'What good can it do?' expostulated Lady Frances.

'Perhaps none. He may die before to-night. But he would like to see her, and I think she would like to see him before he goes.'

'Before he goes. Then you think he is dying?' cried Dulcie.

'The doctors seem to have very little hope. Yet I believe he is just a shade better to-day, and that the improvement has arisen from the hope of seeing you.'

'Why not wait to ask your father's permission?' urged Frances.

'And risk a refusal. No, there is no time for waiting. Come,' said Lizzie. 'I will drive you back when you have seen him.'

'And then I can explain everything to my father,' said

Dulcie. 'I shall be back in time for dinner. You must give papa his cup of tea, Frances dear, and beg him to forgive me.'

'I would as soon face a lion in his wrath,' thought Frances.

They had been walking towards the lodge during this conversation. There stood Aunt Dora's basket carriage and sturdy gray pony, a boy in pepper-and-salt in attendance upon him.

Lizzie jumped in and took the reins, Dulcie seated herself by her side, the boy sprang to his place behind, and away spun the pony towards Tangley at a capital pace, like a pony that knew a good deal depended upon him.

'How long has he been ill?' asked Dulcie in a low voice.

'For many weeks. From the time of the election he seemed out of spirits, and he kept aloof from us all. We thought that his failure worried him, and that he would get over it all the better if he were left to himself. But as time went on he got into a very low way. He could not sleep—he was always roaming about—wrote and read late into the night—led an irregular, rambling kind of life. Then he broke down altogether, took to his bed, and began to be alarmingly delirious. It seemed to be a kind of brain fever; but even the London physician could hardly give us any definite explanation of the illness, or what had caused it. All we could do was to nurse him carefully, and we have done that,' said Lizzie, with tears in her eyes. 'It has been a terrible time for us all, and God only knows how it is to end.'

A quarter of an hour's rapid driving brought them to Tangley Manor.

'You shall not see any one except Morton unless you like,' said Lizzie thoughtfully, as she drove in through the stable gates, which were at the side of the house, screened from all the windows by the thick growth of shrubberies and fine old trees. 'Miss Blake is lying down in her own room—the two girls will be in the drawing-room—they are almost worn out with anxiety and suspense, poor things, and think it hard that they are not allowed to help in the nursing. But Mr. Jebb thought it better that Aunt Dora, the old nurse, and I should take entire charge of Morton.'

'I shall be very glad to escape seeing them,' answered Dulcie. 'I should feel like a criminal in their sight; and yet Heaven knows I am not to blame.'

'We'll slip up to Morton's room,' said Lizzie, when they had alighted at a little side door. 'There is no one with him but old Becky.'

They went in through a lobby, and ran lightly up the servants' staircase, which brought them to the corridor that led to Morton's room. Silently, softly, Lizzie Hardman led Dulcie to the sick room. It was in semi-darkness. The old nurse was

nodding by the fire, Morton was talking to himself in a strange rambling way, as the door opened; but quietly as Lizzie opened it, he lifted himself suddenly in his bed, and called out, 'Dulcie, my Dulcie, come to me.' In the next instant he was sobbing on her shoulder, clinging to her with his wasted arms.

'Oh, my love, my love, how changed you are!' sighed Dulcie, looking tenderly down at the hollow cheeks, the ghastly, pinched face.

'Your work, Dulcie. You thought it was nothing to fling me off; but to me it made all the difference between joy and despair. Life was not worth living without you.'

And then he fell back on the pillow exhausted, and his mind began to wander again. He talked ramblingly—in broken sentences—and Dulcie caught only the words 'his daughter—better to be parted—treason against the dead.'

She sat by his bed, holding his shrunken hand in hers, sometimes bending down to kiss it tenderly, raining tears upon it. Her soul was rising up in rebellion against her father all the while. For the first time in her life she felt herself in revolt against him. Why had he parted her from Morton? To what end was all this misery? When he imposed this parting upon her she had believed, trusting entirely in her father's goodness, that he knew Morton to be in some manner unworthy of her affection—that he had spared her the humiliating knowledge of her lover's inconstancy. But here was Morton constant even to death. For what end, save to gratify an unjustifiable caprice of her father's, had he been brought to the edge of the grave?

'How they must all hate me!' Dulcie said to herself.

The old nurse had retired to the adjoining room. Lizzie sat, half-hidden, in the big arm-chair by the fire. There was no sound save the dropping of the ashes on the hearth, and those occasional murmurs of disjointed speech from Morton. Dulcie sat by him for an hour, his hand clasped in hers almost all the time. Once he looked up at her with a smile strangely unlike his own, as it seemed to her, and murmured, 'It is good of you to come; it is very sweet to see you once more, if only for a little while, my darling. Fate has parted us, Dulcie. Your father was right; he showed his sound judgment. It seems cruel, doesn't it? sorely hard upon you and me. Yet it was just and right. It is the one act in his life which I cannot blame.'

Was this delirium? Dulcie asked herself; or did her lover really mean that he approved of Sir Everard's conduct in cancelling their engagement? His speech implied that there was some reason why he and she should be parted, and that her father had acted wisely and honourably in recognising that reason. Yet what possible cause for their severance could there

be so long as Morton was true? and of his truth and constancy there could be little doubt.

She dared not question him in his weak state, lest she should agitate him. She could only sit quietly by his side, wondering at his strange words, and inclined to think that they were only a portion of that delirious speech which, as Lizzie had told her, had been one of the most alarming features of his illness, continuing so long that the doctors had begun to fear the patient's brain must be permanently injured. For some time Morton lay motionless and silent, as if unconscious of Dulcie's presence. Then he suddenly turned his face to the wall, with a groan of bitterest anguish.

'The son of the murdered and the daughter of the murderer —that would be too horrible,' he cried.

CHAPTER XXXII.

NEVER AGAIN.

Lady Frances went back to the house sorely perplexed in mind. She felt as if she had broken faith with Sir Everard. He had, in a manner, confided his daughter to her care, and she had shown herself useless as a guardian.

'I dread to tell him what has happened,' she said to herself. 'I feel sure that serious face of his can look awfully severe. And I am to give him his tea, Dulcie said. Tea, forsooth! As if such a man as that were to be tamed by tea! It's more likely he will give me my *congé*.'

She went back to the morning-room, where a fresh log had been put upon the fire, and where Scroope was busy setting out the octagon tea-table, with its bright china, and quaint silver pot and kettle.

'Will Miss Courtenay make tea, my lady, or shall I?' asked Scroope.

'Miss Courtenay has gone out. You had better make the tea, please, as you know how your master likes it.'

'Yes, my lady,' answered Scroope, looking intensely astonished.

Frances seated herself in a low basket chair, took up a book, and pretended to be engrossed in its contents. It was a volume of Tennyson's Idylls, and although Lady Frances Grange read three or four pages about the quest of the Holy Grail, she had not the faintest idea what the Grail was, or why any one wanted to find it. Her mind was troubled about Dulcie and Dulcie's father. Yet she looked the image of studiousness as she sat poring over her book, a neat little figure, simply clad in a dark

blue cloth dress, over a velvet petticoat, from the hem of which peeped out a slender foot in its substantial well-made boot. Lady Frances never had many gowns or many boots, but all that she wore was of the best and neatest, and generally in the latest fashion. 'A girl who has only one gown at a time can easily keep abreast with fashion,' she told her richer acquaintance. 'It is you young women who go in for twenty gowns a year who are always behind the times. You are burdened with a heap of clothes that want wearing out.'

Scroope made the tea, gave a last glance at the table to see if its arrangements were up to that high standard which a butler who has a very easy place feels ought to be reached by him, and then withdrew. Lady Frances flung her book face downwards on the rug directly he was gone.

'It's useless trying to read,' she exclaimed petulantly. 'I never was good at understanding Tennyson, and to-day I feel as if my head were stuffed with cotton wool instead of brains.'

Sir Everard came in at this moment.

'Well, Dulcie, are you ready to give me my tea?' he asked; and then seeing that Lady Frances was alone, he came up to the hearth.

He looked at her for a moment or so with grave admiration. The bright head, with its boyish curls; the graceful figure; the piquant, animated face, might win an admiring glance even from the most preoccupied of men. He looked from that blushing, perplexed face to the book on the hearth-rug, and then bent to pick up the volume.

'The Laureate does not appear to have pleased you, Lady Frances,' he said gravely.

'Forgive me for having used Dulcie's book so badly. But I was awfully worried, and the Holy Grail made me savage. Oh, Sir Everard, I'm afraid you will be dreadfully angry with me; and yet I am not to blame. Dulcie has gone to see Morton Blake.'

And then she went on to deseribe what had happened.

'I am sorry my daughter had not more self-respect,' he said, with deep disapproval.

'But if he is at the point of death—if her presence could comfort him—perhaps save his life.'

'That is all folly. If a man is dying, the creature he loves best in this world cannot prolong his life by so much as an hour. My daughter has degraded herself and me by this ridiculous proceeding. I wonder at her folly.'

'Do not be hard upon her, Sir Everard. Consider that only a few months ago she looked upon Morton Blake as her future husband. Remember how happy she was in that engagement.'

'Oh, I see, you are on her side. You think I have used her cruelly,' exclaimed Sir Everard gloomily.

'I do.'

'Child, you do not know what you are talking about. There is that in Morton's character which would have made his marriage with Dulcie a lifelong misery for both. I know that, and he knows it too. Did he urge me to alter my determination? No. He submitted uncomplainingly to the cancelment of his engagement, because he knew that I had acted wisely in breaking it.'

'I cannot understand you,' faltered Frances. 'The whole matter is a mystery to me. I have known Morton intimately for years. I have looked up to him, and admired him, as an elder brother, and I have never discovered any point in his character that was not admirable. And now you tell me that he is no fit husband for Dulcie; that he would make her life miserable.'

'Be content to believe in the fact, without wanting to know why it is so,' answered Sir Everard quietly. 'And now, as Dulcie is away, perhaps you will do me the honour to give me some tea.'

'Pray forgive me, I am very neglectful,' faltered Frances.

'You are all that is sweet and womanly. But you mustn't let her be tempted to visit Morton again,' said Sir Everard, who seemed to have recovered his good-humour.

Frances breathed more freely, and as her host began to talk of other things, of her father and his farm, her brother, and his views of life, his pursuits and ambitions, her spirits revived, and she talked freely, forgetting Dulcie's troubles and everything else in the world except that she was in the society of a remarkably interesting man. They talked a great deal of Beville, in whose tastes and inclinations Sir Everard seemed warmly interested.

'He is not without ambition, I suppose?' he said, after Frances had described her brother's love of hunting and shooting, fishing and coursing, polo and lawn tennis. 'A man's whole mind cannot be given up to amusements.'

'Well, no, I suppose not. But Beville is very young, you see. He was only three-and-twenty last October, and I don't think that he takes a very serious view of life. That will come, I dare say, later.'

'It is to be hoped so. He would not like to be buried alive in Daleshire all his days, I should think.'

'Buried alive in such a hunting country! Why, where could he be better off?'

'Well, there is such a thing as a public career for a young man—there is such a place as the House of Commons.'

'Elections are so expensive,' said Frances, with a careless shrug.

'Besides, the Sheik could never do without Beville. They are devoted to each other. You have no idea what a united family we are. Our poverty has drawn us closer together.'

'But if Beville had plenty of money——'

'I suppose you mean if he were to marry an heiress,' said Frances naïvely. 'People have made that suggestion to me before; but Beville detests heiresses. He will marry for love or not at all.'

'Would it not be possible for him to find a loveable heiress?'

'I don't know,' faltered Frances, blushing vehemently. 'Poor Beville! Don't ask me anything more about him, please! There are subjects that must be sacred. As to his ambition, I am afraid that has never been roused yet. He is very fond of Blatchmardean, and pulls heartily with the pater in all his efforts to free the estate. But as for Parliament—a public life—that kind of thing is out of his line. He is always in the first flight, he has won no end of cups at long jumps, and hammer-throwing, and polo; though he has never been a pot-hunter, don't you know?' said Lady Frances gravely.

'A pot-hunter? What in heaven's name is that?'

'A man who goes in for athletics for the sake of winning prizes.'

'I understand. The phrase is expressive.'

'But hardly elegant from a lady's lips, you would say,' returned Frances, laughing.

Just then the door opened and Dulcie came in. She was deadly pale, and she crept to the hearth and dropped into her usual chair in a curiously listless, half-mechanical way, saying not a word to her father or Lady Frances.

'My poor pet, how weary and white and cold you look!' exclaimed Frances. 'Let me give you some warm tea. Your father is not angry, dearest. Don't look at him in that frightened way.'

Dulcie was looking up at her father with a countenance that expressed a strange, vague terror, gazing at him as she had never gazed before.

'No, my love, I am not angry,' said Sir Everard. 'Your friend has pleaded for you very sweetly, and you know it is not in my nature to be angry with my dearest girl. But you have done a foolish thing all the same, love. You have lowered your own dignity by this visit to Morton's sick room. You must never do such a thing again.'

'I never shall. No, father, of my own free will I will never see Morton Blake again.'

She gave a little shuddering cry, and covered her face with her hands, then rose as if she would have run out of the room, tottered forward a few paces, and fell like a log at her father's feet.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

IN TANGLEY WOOD.

DULCIE recovered from her fainting fit, only to fall into a state of extreme prostration, which lasted for some days. She was not actually ill, and when Sir Everard talked of sending for Mr. Jebb she entreated most earnestly that he might not be summoned.

'There is nothing amiss with me—nothing,' she said wearily, 'except perhaps that I am tired. Let me rest, papa, and do not make yourself unhappy about me. I have no doubt I shall live to be a very old woman. I can see a long vista of years stretching before me.'

She gave a heart-breaking sigh, and turned her face to the wall. This was the longest speech she had made since she came from Tangley Manor. Hitherto she had been curiously silent; not sullen or impatient, but as if mute from utter weariness and depression of soul.

'You see, Sir Everard,' Fanny Grange said, when she and the baronet were alone, 'it is not so easy to break a tie of that kind.'

He stood at the window of his study with his back to Frances, looking out at the bright parterre, gay with its variety of spring flowers—tulips, jonquils, hyacinths, ranunculus—and was slow to answer her. He had asked her to come to his study and talk to him about his daughter, who was lying on the sofa in her bedroom, gazing listlessly at the blue bright sky, employed neither with book nor work, interested in nothing—the image of silent despair.

'I ought not to have brought her home,' said Sir Everard at last; 'that was a mistake. But I was seized with a sudden dread of dying abroad and leaving her alone and helpless in a strange country. I have made no friends for her in all these years. We have been all the world to each other; and now that the sands in my glass are nearly run——'

'Sir Everard,' exclaimed Frances, with a pained expression, 'how can you talk like that? You are in the prime of life.'

'I am at an age which with some men means the middle stage of life—with me it means decline. It is not for every one that the drama of life extends to five acts—some play out their parts in three. The evening shadows are closing round me, Lady Frances. My little girl will soon be alone in this bleak, unfriendly world. If I could but see her happy—happy with another than Morton Blake—before I go, I should die—almost—at peace.'

'I cannot understand why you should be so determined against Dulcie's marriage with Morton.'

'I do not ask you to understand. I have my own reasons, which I prefer to keep to myself. And yet I am treating you more frankly than I have ever treated any one else, because I admire your character—and I want you to be my Dulcie's friend.'

'I am her friend with all my heart and soul. The few days that I have spent with her have endeared her to me more than I can say. Perhaps it is because I pity her so much.'

'Good,' said Sir Everard; 'let us shake hands upon that.'

The little brown hand trembled in his as he clasped it in frankest friendship—never suspecting that an interest in himself and in his sorrow might be growing up in the girl's mind, deeper and stronger than friendship.

'But that you and Dulcie should be friends is only the first part of my scheme,' he pursued; 'I should like you to be sisters.'

'Adopted sisters.'

'No. Sisters-in-law in fact, real sisters in affection. I have a shrewd suspicion that your brother has a sneaking kindness for Dulcie.'

'A sneaking kindness,' echoed Frances; 'why, he adores her. I ought not to betray his secret, poor fellow; because he has a certain amount of pride, and has never said a word to me about his feelings on the subject. But the fact has long been obvious to the Sheik, and Moulty, and me—quite too ridiculously apparent, poor fellow. But what is the good of that? Dulcie will never think of him.'

'How do you know that? A woman is always inclined to be grateful to a man who honestly and intensely loves her; and out of gratitude love—may come,' concluded Sir Everard, with a sudden sigh, as if the words evoked some painful memory.

'It would make me very happy to think that poor Beville had a chance,' said Frances thoughtfully, 'but I have a rooted idea that he is just the very last young man Dulcie would ever care about, especially after having been engaged to Morton.

'Let him come here—let him try his fate,' answered Sir Everard. 'He is a fine, frank young fellow—and—well—if he has not invented gunpowder, what of that? Your genius is apt to be a dangerous incendiary kind of personage, who is better adapted for anything in life than to make a good husband and father.'

'Dulcie is so clever, so accomplished,' sighed Lady Frances.

'Then she will be able to refine and enlarge the ideas of a husband.'

'I'm afraid Beville has hardly a thought of anything but horses and dogs.'

'He is your brother, and you naturally underrate him,' said Sir Everard impatiently. 'Let him come to us, and make himself at home with us. Do not breathe a word to him about this idea of mine. That is a secret between you and me, remember.'

'I shall not forget,' answered Frances, gentler and more earnest of speech than she had been wont to be, softened perhaps by the quiet refinement of all things at Fairview. 'I am more flattered than I can say that you should trust me, Sir Everard, and believe me you *may* trust me.'

'I am sure of that,' he answered gravely.

And then with almost fatherly tenderness he laid his hand upon her shoulder, and looked earnestly into her upturned face. That mobile countenance changed as he looked. A crimson flush mounted to the girl's cheek and brow, and faded as suddenly, leaving her very pale.

'Dear child, it is sweet to me to win your friendship, even at the close of life,' he said earnestly. 'You will be to me almost a second daughter. And now go to my pet, and try to win a smile from her. You are like a good angel in the house.'

The days went by heavily for all the household, for all were full of anxiety about Dulcie. Gradually, slowly, the fair young face lost its painful look of blank amaze, as at the sudden revelation of some terrible grief, and softened into an expression of mournful resignation. News came from Tangley of Morton's improvement. The peril was said to be over. His recovery must needs be slow; but the angel of death no longer hovered near the threshold.

This good news Dulcie heard on the day she left her bedroom, and returned to the ordinary duties of life. Her informant was Mr. Mawk, the curate-in-charge of the bare old church at Austhorpe, who came to make his adieux before departing to shed the light of his talents and virtues upon a congregation more inclined to sympathize with advanced Ritualism than were the farmers and farmers' wives and daughters of rustic Daleshire.

'The fact is, Miss Courtenay,' said the curate, 'this place is utterly benighted, and the people so love darkness that they resent any effort to enlighten them. They are a well-meaning set of people, I admit, and according to their lights they have been kind to me; but their ignorance and prejudice are something astounding; and the man who remains among them must be content to hide his light under a bushel. How my successor, Mr. Haldimond, can reconcile himself to the idea of vegetating in such a hole—I beg your pardon, Miss Courtenay; Fairview, of course, is charming—is more than I can understand.'

'You have endured our darkness for nearly three years,' said Dulcie, with a faint smile at his grave self-importance. 'Why should it be harder for Mr. Haldimond to bear than for you?'

'Because he is a man of some mark, while I had only just been ordained when I came to Austhorpe. Haldimond is my senior by twelve or fourteen years. He is a Christchurch man and a ripe scholar.'

'I hope he will be good to the poor,' said Dulcie.

'I hope he plays lawn tennis,' said Frances.

'Oh, he is one of the best of men, and is sure to do his duty. He is a man of extraordinary energy and earnestness. Whatever he takes upon himself to do, he will do with all his heart and soul. That is why I cannot understand his putting up with such a contracted sphere for his labours. When last I heard of him he was curate-in-charge of an immense parish in Ratcliff Highway, all among sailors and the very dregs of the population. He is a great athlete, Lady Frances, and was a crack tennis player at Oxford when the game was just beginning to be fashionable. I am sure you will like him.'

And now Mr. Mawk, not without a touch of sentiment, took his farewell, invoking all manner of blessings on Dulcie before he went.

'I am rejoiced to hear that Mr. Blake's long illness has taken such a happy turn,' he said as he shook hands with her. 'What anxiety you must have suffered while the result was doubtful! I hope when the happy event takes place I may be allowed to assist in the ceremony. I shall be charmed to come any distance for that purpose.'

'You are very good,' faltered Dulcie, with a pale, distressed face, 'but I think it will be very long before you will be called upon to assist at my marriage.'

'Ger—good gracious, you don't—er—mean to say——' stammered the curate, looking from Dulcie to her friend in bewilderment.

Lady Frances frowned at him, and he held his peace, and bowed himself out awkwardly.

'Fanny dear, stop their congratulations and questions somehow,' cried Dulcie, hiding her tears upon Frances Grange's shoulder.

'But is it not a relief to know that he is recovering, that he is not going to die of your desertion?'

'Yes, that ought to make me happy, ought it not?' answered Dulcie, with a faint smile. 'And I think it would—if—if——'

Here she burst into passionate weeping, and sobbed out her grief upon her friend's breast. Frances let her cry, and asked no questions, and uttered no consoling commonplaces. Tears were a better balm for grief than any preachment from friendly

lips. Yet Frances was not a little mystified by this vehement sorrow, which seemed inconsistent with Dulcie's unselfish nature. Surely the girl ought to have been so rejoiced at her lover's recovery, that her own grief should have been forgotten, or put aside as of little moment.

'And now, young lady, I am not going to let you mope indoors any longer,' said Frances, when Dulcie had dried her tears. 'It is a lovely afternoon, and you shall drive me into the woods, and we'll gather a heap of primroses, dog-violets, and wood anemones, to decorate the church with next Sunday, so that this Christchurch scholar may see that stony barn brightened and beautified. Nothing like hard work as a cure for low spirits; and you shall work like a galley slave, Mistress Dulcie. Come, darling, order your carriage, and then we'll go and put on our hats.'

'Do you really wish to drive, Fanny?'

'I shall expire if you stifle me indoors any longer. Remember I am used to an open-air life.'

'Then I'll order the carriage at once, dear,' said Dulcie submissively.

Half an hour later the two girls were in the wood near Tangley Manor, gathering wild flowers, while the ponies waited in a sheltered corner, and the groomling in charge slumbered placidly in the bottom of the carriage, with the reins in his hands.

Tangley Wood was a lovely spot on such an afternoon as this —April at her best and brightest, when she has shed her last tears, and tricked herself out in sunshine, before tripping off the stage she has done so much to beautify. The hawthorns were all in leaf, the hollies were gay with the lingering berries of last autumn, and the mossy ground was covered with spring flowers. The balmy air, the silence of the wood, broken only by a blackbird's melodious whistle, had a tranquilizing effect upon Dulcie's nerves and spirits. Nature is so lovely that even our darkest moods must yield to her soothing power. And Frances Grange was one of those girls with whom it was almost impossible to be silent or dull. She was so full of brightness and fun, so quick at seizing the ridiculous side of a subject. She pretended not to see that Dulcie was full of care, and insisted upon discussing Mr. Mawk and his prospects, clerical and matrimonial, with a wealth of absurd conjecture that made Dulcie smile in spite of herself.

Then, again, there is a pleasure in all work done for a good purpose.

A late Easter was just over, and the hothouse flowers which had been lent for the Easter decorations had been restored to their owners. The idea of decorating the old gray church for Low Sunday with these simple woodland blossoms was delight-

ful to Dulcie. She worked her hardest, digging up great masses of feathery moss, gathering innumerable primroses and blue scentless violets, until she had nearly filled one large basket, while Frances worked at another.

Dulcie was on her knees in a hawthorn thicket, her hat thrown off, and the sun streaming upon her bright hair through the leafless oaks above her, when she was startled by the rustling of footsteps amongst the fallen leaves, and looking up saw a woman and three children approaching slowly through the thicket, the children gathering flowers as they came, the woman walking with feeble, uncertain footsteps, as if even a quiet ramble in that lovely woodland were too much for her strength.

There was a bank near Dulcie, and here the mother sat down to rest, while the children strayed about among the trees. 'Play at hide-and-seek, dears,' she said, 'while poor ma rests a little. But don't go far.'

'We won't lose you, ma dear,' cried a shrill boy; 'we know the big oak tree, and we'll come back soon.'

Off they scampered. Shabby knickerbockers and gray stockings, chubby legs and scarlet socks, all disappeared in a rush behind the brown oak boles. The mother sighed, and then coughed, and sighed again, and laid her thin hand upon her chest, as if in pain. Dulcie looked up from her primroses, and at the sight of the wan cheek with its hectic flush she was moved to compassion. She left her basket and went to the bank where the woman was sitting.

'I'm afraid you are not very strong,' she said, sitting beside her, and looking at her with sweetest sympathy.

'No,' the woman answered, with her eyes half closed, and her head drooping a little. 'I get weaker and weaker every day, in spite of this fine fresh air and all the kindness that has been shown to me. And the pain in my chest gets worse.'

She lifted her head and looked at Dulcie, and at sight of the sweet, pitying face, and innocent blue eyes, gave a little start.

'Surely no one else could have just such eyes as those,' she said. 'You must be Miss Courtenay.'

'Yes, that is my name. I thought you were a stranger here, for I know almost every one about. How do you happen to recognise me?'

'Because I lived four years in your mother's service. I knew you by your likeness to her. I have been expecting to meet you somewhere or somehow for the last ten days, for I knew you had come home, and you have been a good deal in my mind. But it was not guesswork when I recognised you. You have Miss Alice Rothney's eyes.'

'I have often been told I am like my mother. And you were really in her service before she was married?'

'Before and after her marriage. I was with her till she died.'

Dulcie turned very pale, and looked at the woman uneasily, wistfully, as if she would fain have questioned her, yet shrank from doing so.

'Strange that I should meet you like this,' she said thoughtfully.

'Hardly strange, dear Miss Courtenay, if you are in the habit of walking in this wood. I am living in a cottage close by, and I come here every day. I am just able to crawl as far as this, and I sit here and work while my children play about.'

'I am glad to have met you. There are no servants at Fairview who remember my poor mother,' said Dulcie, with more reserve than was usual to her.

'No, the servants were all dismissed when Sir Everard went abroad. I am more than glad to see you, Miss Courtenay. I have been hoping and praying that I might look upon your face before I died.'

'Do not talk of dying. I hope the summer will bring you strength.'

'The summer will make no difference to me, dear young lady. I doubt if I shall see the beginning of it. I know I shall not see the end. Yes, I have longed to meet you, longed with all my heart, for I loved your dear mother fondly.'

'Then why did you not stay to take care of me when she was gone? I should have loved to have some one about me who had known her—some one who could have talked to me of her.'

'Sir Everard dismissed us all when he broke up his household,' answered Lucy. 'I am not saying that as a complaint against him, for he was a good and generous master to me, but I want you to know that I should never have left you of my own accord. I would have been true and faithful to you as I was true and faithful to her.'

'Tell me about her,' cried Dulcie impulsively, forgetting her reserve of a few minutes ago.

'She was the loveliest woman I ever saw—the loveliest and the sweetest. Her nature was as beautiful as her face.'

'And was she happy, quite happy?' asked Dulcie.

'Dear Miss Courtenay, did you ever know any one that was quite happy? She had many things to make her life bright and pleasant to her, a devoted husband, plenty of money, many friends, youth and beauty.'

'But you must know if all these things made her happy. Was she very fond of my father?'

'She looked up to him and admired him,' faltered Lucy.

'But she did not love him; he was not her own free choice? I heard that hinted once by a lady I know, and it cut me to the

quick. There was some one else my mother liked better before her marriage, was there not?'

'I am not going to talk about the past, Miss Courtenay. Your dear mother trusted me; she treated me more like a friend than a servant, and anything that I came to know in that way must be sacred.'

'Yes, I understand. I ought not to have asked you,' said Dulcie hurriedly.

Mrs. Aspinall's light talk was true, then. Sir Everard had not been his wife's favourite suitor. There had been some one else; some one who had been rejected by her family, to whom her heart had been given.

The stranger startled her presently by a sudden question.

'Is it true that you and Mr. Blake are to be married, Miss Courtenay?'

'No. Our engagement has been broken off.'

'I am glad of that.'

'Indeed!' exclaimed Dulcie, with some hauteur. 'Pray, what fault have you to find with Mr. Blake?'

'None. He is my benefactor. I owe it to his kindness that I am spending the last weeks of my life in this sweet country place; that I have a servant to wait upon me, a pretty cottage to live in, and am troubled about nothing. But I do not think it would have been for your happiness to marry him.'

'That is what my father tells me,' said Dulcie, with a sigh.

'Come, Dulcie,' cried Lady Frances, coming out of a green hollow where she had been on her knees gathering wood anemones for the last half-hour. 'I have filled my basket, and I hope yours is full too, for it's time we went home to tea.'

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN EARNEST MAN.

Never had that rude, barn-like structure, Austhorpe Church, looked prettier than on the Sunday next after Easter. All those exotics which had glorified the village fane on Easter Sunday had been restored to the ladies and gentlemen who had lent them. Mrs. Aspinall's arums and azaleas had been carted home to her hothouses. Dulcie's gardenias and white tulips were safe on their shelves under the head gardener's care, or were adorning the rooms their mistress lived in. But the church looked no poorer for the loss of these expensive adornments. Altar and font, pulpit and reading desk, were beautified with borders of freshest moss, in which were embedded clusters of primroses,

violets, and wood-anemones. The base of the font was a mass of daffodils, shining golden bright against the dark granite pedestal, purpled by time. To the villagers, who had known and loved these wild woodland blossoms ever since their eyes first opened to an understanding of nature's beauty, the simple adornments of to-day were sweeter than the grand unknown flowers which had served for the paschal decorations. Flowers lent for the occasion by Mrs. Aspinall and Miss Courtenay, flowers with long Latin names which nobody could remember or pronounce, were not half so good as the modest little blossoms that glorified the woods near home, the woods which were—or seemed to be—public property. There was no sense of obligation or patronage to mar the villagers' delight in the decorations to-day. As they lingered after the service to admire font or altar there was no need to say, 'How kind of Mrs. Aspinall,' or 'How good of Miss Courtenay to contribute such lovely flowers!' They had only to lift up their hearts in silent thankfulness to the Creator who gave His woodland blossoms for all alike, and gave them with a plenteousness which no earthly gardener, labour as he might in the multiplication of slips and seedlings, could imitate.

Lady Frances and Dulcie had worked their hardest for several hours on Saturday, to achieve even so simple a result.

Lord Blatchmardean's daughter had shrewdly determined that the only way to make Dulcie forget her troubles was to employ her mind and fingers about something, no matter how trivial the task. When the church-work was finished, Lady Frances found she had a pressing necessity for shopping at Highclere, and entreated Dulcie to drive her there directly after luncheon. The drive and the shopping, which was a very small business as to actual expenditure, occupied the whole afternoon, for Frances insisted upon coming round by Blatchmardean Castle on their way home, and running in to see if the dear old Sheik was well, and was resigned to his daughter prolonging her visit at Fairview for a week or two. They were home in time for the afternoon tea, which Sir Everard, whether well or ill, always shared with them. But that friendly meal had lost something of its old pleasantness. Dulcie no longer hung over her father's chair as she ministered to him—no longer sat at his feet, or rested her bright head upon his knee, in childlike affection. She brought him his cup of tea, and waited on him with respectful tenderness; but the old caressing ways were wanting, and Sir Everard felt that his daughter and he had drifted wide apart since their return to Fairview. Dulcie sat in her corner by the hearth, joined politely in any conversation that her father or Lady Frances started, but it seemed somehow as if her thoughts were far away from them. Frances noticed that this curious restraint was always upon her in her father's presence. She

talked more freely, and seemed happier, when the two girls were alone together.

'Yet she used to be so utterly devoted to her father,' mused Frances. 'Morton once complained to me that he was only second in her love. But I suppose she has not forgiven Sir Everard for breaking her engagement. I dare say that would be a hard thing for any girl to forgive; and these gentle girls have an immense power of resistance. I only wish she would fall in love with Beville, and make a happy end of all this perplexity. But that seems quite too good to happen.'

* * * * * *

There was a twitter among the village children, and a thrill of expectation even in older breasts, on the Sunday next after Easter, when the schoolmistress began her voluntary on the harmonium, and when every eye that could so turn was directed to the low stone doorway of the vestry, whence the new curate was presently to emerge.

Hardly any one except Mr. Gomersall, the churchwarden, had seen him, or had any idea what he was like. He might be big or little, gray, or dark, or sandy. Those most interested in his coming, as in an event which stirred the stagnant waters of village life, had made mental pictures of him involuntarily, in the vagabond fancy to which an unemployed mind is disposed. All the young women in the village regretted Mr. Mawk; all the young men ridiculed and affected to despise him, yet were glad he was gone. The middle-aged, steady-going parishioners had suspected him of Papistical leanings, and hoped the new man would be of broader and less modern views; that he would snuffle and drawl less than the Reverend Lionel, and would be able to preach a good, plain-sailing, practical sermon in twelve or fifteen minutes.

And now the arpeggios of the voluntary swelled with all the power of the loudest stops in the harmonium, and heralded the entrance of the stranger. He had to stoop a little as he came through the arched doorway; and when he lifted his head and looked round him with a swift sweeping glance that surveyed the whole congregation in a flash, his parishioners saw that their pastor was a man worth looking at.

He looked somewhat older than his three-and-thirty years. He was tall, broad-shouldered, erect; with a noble head nobly set on. His eyes were dark gray, his complexion was pale, and there were shadows about his eyes that told of overwork or ill-health. He looked a man born to command; and the congregation felt that he ought to have been a bishop, and was altogether too good for Austhorpe.

'He'll never stay in such a dead-and-alive place as Austhorpe,' thought Mrs. Gomersall, the churchwarden's wife, a rosy-faced,

buxom matron, glorious in the freshness of her Easter Sunday bonnet.

Mr. Haldimond walked slowly to the reading desk, looked with a pleasant smile at the primroses and violets in their mossy border, glanced once more round the church, and in that one glance saw the fair-haired, sad-faced girl in the Fairview pew, with downcast eyes upon her book, and the bright brunette face beside her, and wondered a little who these two girls could be, so different from the rest of the congregation; not even excepting the honourable Mrs. Aspinall, who confronted the newcomer with the placid impertinence of her double eye-glass. Sir Everard had accompanied his daughter and Lady Frances to church according to his unvarying habit. He was looking ill and careworn, a fact which Mrs. Aspinall had noted without the aid of her eye-glass; for although it was quite permissible to stare at a clerical nobody like Mr. Haldimond, it was not good form to scrutinize so important a personage as Sir Everard Courtenay with the same direct gaze. At the baronet Mrs. Aspinall stole an occasional glance full of compassion.

'No wonder he looks so ill when he has nothing to interest him in life except that chit of a daughter,' she reflected. 'What a pity he doesn't marry!'

Arthur Haldimond began the service in his low, grave voice, which was distinctly heard in the furthest corners of the old church. He read admirably, as everybody felt before the first part of the service was over. There was no attempt at intoning, no fashionable sing-song, no brisk cantering over the level ground of the liturgy, with a view to leaving more time for the decorative or musical portions thereof. All was sober, serious, reverential. His sermon was brief, for he did not wish to weary those simple, early-dining folks, some of whom had driven half a dozen miles to hear him; but brief as the sermon was, it told his hearers a good deal. It told them that he had put his hand to the plough, meaning to follow it with all his heart and all his strength; that he had come among them prepared to love them and to work for them, as he had loved and worked for a large mass of people in one of the most notorious neighbourhoods of the biggest city in the world.

'It is a place that has borne an evil name ever since it has been a place at all, it is hardly possible to imagine a wickeder place, out of hell,' he said, 'yet I found plenty of kind hearts, plenty of willing hands, and much instinctive Christianity to help me in my work. I found plenty of parishioners worthy of a parish priest's love, of his confidence and respect, and hardly one who was not entitled to his pity; not one so bad that there was no fair spot in the evil nature; not one so deeply fallen as to be unworthy a good man's effort to pick him up. I have left

them, not because I was tired of them, not because I ever for one single moment of my life among them despaired of doing good to them, and finding improvement in them; but because my physical health broke down under the strain of continual and anxious work, and because the doctors warned me that if I went on my mental health must give way too. Forgive me, dear friends, for talking to you about myself, but I want you all to know what manner of parson I am, that I am used to hard work, and love it, and that you never need be afraid to send for me, or to come to me, or to send your children to me when you think they need more instruction than the ordinary Sunday school course can give them. I love to teach the young, I love to talk with the old. I shall start instruction classes for boys and girls on four evenings of the week, two evenings for the boys, two for the girls. I will only keep them an hour at a time, for I don't want to weary them, or to make the Scriptures unpalatable to them by overdosing. I want to show them what a lovely book their Bible is, and what ineffable wisdom they may find in its pages if they know how to seek. Count upon me, my dear brethren, as one of yourselves, one with you in your joys and your griefs, a friend to whom no trouble of yours can be indifferent, who can never weary in working with you to make our own little bit of this big world better and nearer heaven.'

The preacher's words were so plain and straightforward that the smallest child in the church understood him. His deep, resonant voice, trained in speaking to large congregations, softened as he addressed this little flock. He looked round upon them with his kindly gray eyes, as if he were already their friend. The grave, handsome face, with its ever-varying expression, the frank, sympathetic manner, won their hearts before his first sermon was ended. This man was a priest whom they could revere and love.

'Didn't I tell you he was the right sort, Bess?' whispered Mr. Gomersall to his wife, as he ducked to grope for his hat under the bench in his comfortable family pew.

Mrs. Aspinall's barouche stood before the churchyard gate, the well-fed horses tossing their heads and jingling their bits, to the admiration of the villagers; but Mrs. Aspinall was in no hurry to get into her carriage and drive away.

Coming out of the porch, she contrived to waylay Sir Everard and the two girls.

'My dear Sir Everard, this is a surprise! I had no idea you had returned. How cruel of you, Dulcie, not to let me know! I should have rushed to call upon you directly if I had had the remotest notion. How do you do, Frances? Naughty girl! You haven't been to see me for an age. But, dear Sir Everard, you are not looking quite so well as I had hoped to see you——'

'My friends are charmingly unanimous in that opinion,' answered Sir Everard, rather wearily. 'I suppose the fact is that blue skies and southern coasts are no remedy for chronic disorders of long standing. A man may take his gout or his rheumatism to the Fijis or the Philippines: but gout is gout and rheumatism is rheumatism to the end of the chapter.'

'Well, I am very glad you have come home,' said Mrs. Aspinall, 'and now you are all coming to lunch with me. Yes, you are,' as Sir Everard began to excuse himself. 'I shall take no denial. Dulcie owes me some recompense for running away just before my little dance. It was a very nice little dance, wasn't it, Frances?'

'It was awfully jolly,' answered Lady Frances.

'I am going to ask the curate man to luncheon,' said Mrs. Aspinall. 'Do you know I never felt more interest in any body at first sight. Quite an awakening sort of person, don't you know. I only hope he won't make us feel uncomfortable in our minds, and that he will confine himself to stirring up the poor people, who drink and swear to a shocking extent, I am told, and require to have their consciences worked upon. A remarkably fine-looking man, too—a handsome, intellectual head. I hear that he is a man with a history. He belonged to rich people, and was brought up in the lap of luxury, and began life in the very best society. And when he was three or four-and-twenty his people contrived to lose all their money somehow, and he went into the Church. Oh, here he comes.'

They had been standing on a bit of level greensward on one side of the porch, Mrs. Aspinall murmuring her confidences to Sir Everard, Dulcie by her father's side, with sad, serious face, and downcast eyes; Frances Grange bright and animated as usual, returning the greetings of her humble acquaintances with smiles and nods.

Mr. Haldimond came slowly along the path with Mr. Gomersall, the churchwarden, by his side. This gave Mrs. Aspinall her opportunity.

'Mr. Gomersall, pray make me known to our new pastor,' she said, and the good-tempered farmer stammered out an introduction, presenting the stranger in a confused form of words to Mrs. Aspinall and Sir Everard.

'I have set my heart upon your taking your luncheon with me,' said the lady. 'Sir Everard and his daughter, and Lady Frances Grange are coming. The barouche will hold us all. It is a regular Noah's ark. Now, please, don't refuse me. You couldn't have a better opportunity for getting acquainted with ever so many of your parishioners at once.'

Arthur Haldimond hesitated, stole a glance at Dulcie's sad, pale face, and accepted the fifth seat in the barouche. It was

not Mrs. Aspinall's overpowering manner, which few people could stand up against, that influenced his acceptance; but that second look at Dulcie had interested him curiously in the girl's character. Here surely was the heroine of some painful story. So young, so exquisitely girlish, yet with such deep sorrow written in every line of the innocent face.

Mr. Haldimond and the two girls sat with their backs to the horses. Sir Everard occupied the place of honour by Mrs. Aspinall's side. The curate glanced from Dulcie's face to her father's, and there too he saw the impress of secret care. It was not ill-health alone that had drawn those deep lines about the handsome mouth, that perpendicular wrinkle in the thoughtful brow. Much brooding over painful memories, the rankling misery of one great sorrow, had moulded those features into a look of intense melancholy.

'How charmed you must be at Morton's recovery!' began Mrs. Aspinall, smiling benevolently at Dulcie; but a sharp kick from Lady Frances stopped this gush of sympathy, and turned the current of the lady's speech; 'and how delightful it must have been for you to see the dear romantic Moors, with their mahogany complexions and their white drapery, and the blue, blue southern sea, and the mountains, and the scenery in a general way! I suppose it is absolutely delicious.'

'It is very beautiful,' answered Dulcie, with a mechanical air.

'But you like home best, perhaps,' suggested Mr. Haldimond.

'Yes. I used to be very fond of Austhorpe.'

'Used to be? Has your mind outgrown this little place?'

'No—only—since the doctor says papa must not spend another winter in England, I feel that Austhorpe is no longer our home,' faltered Dulcie. 'We must reconcile ourselves to being wanderers.'

'And I suppose next winter you will want to go still further afield. You will be asking Sir Everard to take you to Egypt or India.'

'I shall be glad to go wherever is best for him.'

'What has become of Miss Pawker?' asked Lady Frances.

'My poor dear Louisa had one of her tiresome headaches,' said Mrs. Aspinall, 'but I dare say she will be well enough to take her luncheon with us.'

The fact was that poor dear Louisa had been coaxed to forego the morning service in order that she might make herself generally useful in preparing an elegant-looking luncheon for the baronet and his daughter, whom Mrs. Aspinall—fully aware of their return, despite her affected surprise at that fact—was determined to take home with her. The consequence of this prudent arrangement was a table elegantly decorated with hothouse flowers, and a tasteful display of those French-looking *hors d'œuvres* in the way of anchovies, *caviare*, olives, tiny pink and

white radishes, and other small dainties which set forth a table at a moderate cost, and give colour and variety to the homely roast mutton, or the monotonous boiled chicken.

To all outward seeming the luncheon party at Aspinall Towers was a success. Arthur Haldimond was a man of wide reading and considerable experience. He had travelled a good deal, he had lived in society and out of society, and he was able to talk to anybody and of almost any subject. He contrived to interest Sir Everard; he contrived to interest Dulcie; Lady Frances was charmed with him; Mrs. Aspinall told herself that the curate man was an acquisition; Miss Pawker hung upon his words as if he were inspired.

After luncheon there was a sauntering half-hour in the Italian garden, which looked its best under a cloudless blue sky; and as Mrs. Aspinall and her guests strolled in and out of the narrow serpentine walks, or up and down a broad green alley, Mr. Haldimond contrived to take his place at Dulcie's side.

'I hear that I shall find you a most valuable coadjutor, Miss Courtenay,' he said, when they were far enough from the rest of the party to be confidential. 'Mr. Gomersall tells me that you have done wonders for the school, and that all the poor people adore you.'

'They are very good to think so much of such small kindnesses,' answered Dulcie, with a sigh. 'I have been very happy among them.'

'Have been? Why speak in a past tense? I count upon your help as a pillar of strength. Pray do not disappoint me.'

'My life henceforward will be very uncertain. My father's health may oblige us to leave Austhorpe at any moment.'

'Let us hope not. And even if you have to desert us sometimes, that is no reason why you should not interest yourself in your native village while you are here. Think what a glorious thing it is to be the dispenser of happiness to those whose joys are so few, to be a consoler among those whose sorrows are so many.'

'We all have our sorrows,' answered Dulcie, with deepest despondency.

'I hope that the griefs which shadow your bright young life are but passing clouds,' said Mr. Haldimond, contemplating the sweet, sad face with infinite compassion. 'Yet you speak as if all joy were gone from you for ever.'

'It has,' answered Dulcie.

'Believe me, no. Youth lives in the present, and deems every sorrow eternal. It is only when we have travelled some distance on the road of life that we know the meaning of hope. Your father's precarious health is the cause of your unhappiness, I apprehend?'

'It is one cause,'

'Can you not find comfort in the thought that your love has lightened his life, that the same filial love will console and cheer him to the end; and that when the hour of parting shall come, as it must come to all of us, the severance will be but for a little while? We say good-bye to each other in a world whose brightest hours and fairest scenes are shadowed by the pain and travail of all nature, to meet where there is neither grief nor care.'

'Are we *all* to meet there?' asked Dulcie, with a despairing look. 'Will not the sinners be shut out of that happy world?'

'The unpenitent sinner only. God's great love promises forgiveness to every sinner who honestly and really—not in a mere form of words, but with all his heart and mind and strength, and with every act of atonement in his power—repents his sins.'

'I see. It is not enough for him to be sorry in his heart of hearts. He must atone; he must bear the brunt of his sin. He must endure the consequences of his evil-doing here if he wants to escape them hereafter.'

'A man who is sorry in his heart of hearts would naturally do his utmost to atone for his sins. There was a striking instance of that in your own neighbourhood last year, in the case of that unhappy creature who gave himself up to justice for a murder committed twenty years ago. Ignorant, brutalized as one might suppose such a man to be, yet even to his blunted mind conscience spoke plainly, and showed him the only way to obtain pardon.'

He looked at Dulcie as he finished speaking, and was startled by the ghastly pallor of her face—the horror in her eyes.

'Forgive me,' he faltered, 'I fear I have spoken of a topic which is in some way painful.'

'Yes,' she answered hurriedly, 'it is a painful subject. The Blakes are our friends.'

'I understand. Pray forgive me. A man coming a stranger into a neighbourhood is sure to make mistakes of this kind. Society is so interlinked and bound together. Let us talk of more cheerful subjects. I want you to tell me all about the schools, Miss Courtenay. Mr. Gomersall has given me some information; but though he seems the best-natured of men, and ready to co-operate with me in every way, he has not the knack of expressing himself very clearly, and I have a great deal yet to learn.'

Dulcie roused herself with an effort, and endeavoured to answer all the curate's questions. The warm earnestness of his manner, his evident delight in the work before him, beguiled her into a brief forgetfulness of her own troubles, and for the next half-hour she talked brightly of her experiences in the schools and among the cottagers of Austhorpe.

'You must make friends with the elder Miss Blake,' she said, 'the lady whom almost everybody calls Aunt Dora. You will find her a more valuable ally than I can possibly be.'

'I am inclined to doubt that. But if you will introduce me to the lady I will do my best to secure her aid.'

'I will leave some one else to do that,' stammered Dulcie; 'I am not likely to see Miss Blake for some time.'

Mr. Haldimond felt that he had again touched upon some painful subject. It seemed to be his evil fate to distress this sweet girl, whose sadness he would so gladly have lessened by any art in his power.

Sir Everard came up to them at this moment, under convoy of Mrs. Aspinall, who had been exerting all her fascinations in a prolonged saunter about the gardens, and had succeeded in making the baronet's life a burden to him.

'My dear Dulcie, if you and Lady Frances are ready, I shall be glad to take you home,' he said, strangling an incipient yawn, and Dulcie ran off to summon Frances, who was enlivening the faithful Pawker with her pleasant chat, and making that genteel drudge forget her drudgery and her dependence.

'You don't think the walk across the park or through the fields will be too much fatigue for you?' asked Dulcie, when they were ready to start.

'Pray let my carriage take you home,' urged Mrs. Aspinall. 'It can be ready in a quarter of an hour.'

'You are very kind,' said Sir Everard. 'No, I shall enjoy the walk this lovely afternoon.'

And so they departed, Mrs. Aspinall, Miss Pawker, and Mr. Haldimond walking with them to the little iron gate which divided the gardens from the park. Mr. Haldimond would willingly have gone further with them, but he was bent upon getting a little enlightenment from Mrs. Aspinall as to the social mysteries amidst which he had found himself blindly stumbling.

Having parted from the baronet, Mrs. Aspinall, who liked masculine society, was all sweetness to the curate.

'Don't be in a hurry to leave us,' she entreated. 'You have no afternoon service, and you have hours to spare before what Mr. Mawk used to call vespers—much to the indignation of our country bumpkins.'

'You are very good, but I must go back to spend an hour in the Sunday school. I mean to revive the old-fashioned afternoon service, for Mr. Gomersall tells me it was the most popular service of the day, as it suited farmers and people who live a long way off.'

'Pray don't make a slave of yourself,' expostulated Mrs. Aspinall, in a tone of friendly interest. 'Austhorpe people are horridly ungrateful. They will only revile you for your pains.'

'"When you do well and suffer for it,"' quoted Mr. Haldimond. 'I must do my utmost according to my lights, and abide the issue. But I fear I have been doing very badly to-day. I had set my heart upon winning the friendship of that sweet-looking girl, Miss Courtenay, and on two occasions I was idiot enough to say something that caused her extreme distress. Yet I had no idea why it should be so. The first time was when I spoke of the man who was tried at Highclere for a murder, and condemned upon his own confession. The second was when I asked her to introduce me to a certain Miss Dora Blake.'

'You poor foolish man, you could hardly have done worse,' exclaimed Mrs. Aspinall. 'This comes of not getting yourself coached by some one who knows the society you are coming into. Mr. Mawk ought really to have given you the *carte du pays*. However, in Miss Courtenay's case it was almost impossible to avoid coming to grief, for even I myself did not know the real state of affairs till Lady Frances Grange enlightened me, just before luncheon.'

'Pray explain.'

'Well, in the first place you ought not to have spoken of the murder, because the man who was murdered was Walter Blake, of Tangley, to whose only son, Morton, Miss Courtenay was engaged.'

'Oh,' said Mr. Haldimond, 'she is engaged, is she?'

'Don't interrupt, troublesome man,' cried Mrs. Aspinall, with her kittenish air. 'If you were listening properly you would have heard that I said was engaged, not is engaged. To gratify some caprice of Sir Everard's the engagement has been broken off, and Dulcie is absolutely miserable. And six months ago she was the brightest, happiest little creature.'

'But surely her father must have had some substantial reason for breaking the engagement,' said Mr. Haldimond. 'He would not sacrifice his daughter's happiness to a whim.'

'What reason could he have? Morton is altogether charming; he has horrid radical ideas, but still is excessively nice. He has a fine estate, is entirely his own master, intellectual, ambitious, good-looking, high-principled. What more could the most exacting father demand in his daughter's suitor?'

'Yet there must be a hitch somewhere,' said the curate thoughtfully. 'No father would willingly make his daughter unhappy; and I fear that Miss Courtenay is really unhappy. Even in her conversation with me, a stranger, she unconsciously revealed the depth of her misery. And she is so girlish—childish almost in her freshness and simplicity. I feel intensely sorry for her.'

'Sweetest child, my heart positively bleeds for her,' said Mrs. Aspinall, with a sigh, which was almost extinguished in a yawn. 'Do come back to the house and take some tea.'

'Thanks, you are too good, but I must go to my school;' and the curate shook hands with the two ladies, and went out at the little gate and across the grass with the steady, swinging pace of a man who has walked half over England and done no small portion of the Continent at a systematic five miles an hour.

CHAPTER XXXV.

'I DO NOT UNDERSTAND YOU, MORTON.'

ENCOURAGED by Sir Everard's kindness, and stimulated by hints from Lady Frances, Lord Beville appeared at Fairview not once, but many times, before his sister's long visit came to an end. Dulcie received him graciously, as her friend's brother, but the vainest of men could hardly have imagined himself peculiarly favoured or chosen out from the herd, so evident was the girl's unconsciousness of his admiration, and calm indifference to himself. She only recognised his existence as Fanny's brother. She lived in a world apart from his, taking no interest in his occupations and amusements. How could two beings whose minds were so differently formed, ever be brought into tender or sympathetic relations? Beville might adore Dulcie with a reverent love, looking up to her as his bright particular star, but how was Dulcie to let herself down to the level of a young man whose billiard playing was his most intellectual accomplishment, and who from October to April spent five days out of the seven following somebody's hounds, and sighed for nothing higher or more noble in life than to have a pack of his own to follow?

'If I could but afford to hunt the country,' he said to his sister with a sigh. 'I know they'd all like me for their M. F. H.'

'Of course they would, dear,' answered Frances; 'and if—if you could marry a nice girl with plenty of ready money you could take the hounds next year. I know Sir James Prior is tired of them.'

'There is only one girl I would give sixpence for, and she will never have me,' sighed Beville.

His sister began to think he was right. Dulcie, who had so loved Morton, never could or would stoop to the lower level of an unintellectual lover. Beville's good looks, Beville's good heart, went for nothing with a girl of highly-cultivated mind, to whom intellectual society was a necessity.

Frances stayed at Fairview nearly five weeks, Sir Everard seeming always loth to let her go and Dulcie clinging to her

with ever-increasing affection. She had done much to win the girl to temporary forgetfulness of her grief, but the grief remained all the same, an abiding fact, which no arts of Frances Grange could cure. Sorrow had set a seal upon the fair young face, and had given a new character to Dulcie's girlish beauty. To the eye of Arthur Haldimond that pale and pensive countenance seemed the face of a martyr. He could picture just such a face, heavenly calm, amidst the carnage of a Roman amphitheatre. The day came when Frances protested that she positively must go home. The dear, patient Sheik had been shamefully neglected, and his daughter must not stay away from him another hour.

'But if you suppose you are going to get rid of me altogether, Dulcie, you are vastly mistaken,' protested Frances as she kissed her friend. 'I shall ride over to see you three or four times a week, and I insist upon your driving those underworked porpoises of yours to Blatchmardean on the off days. We are miserable paupers, but I can give you a cup of tea, and if Sir Everard will come with you sometimes I shall be—ever so proud.'

'You know how little chance there is of that, Fanny. He seldom leaves his study now except for a lonely walk in the shrubberies.'

'I know he mopes horribly, and that is the very way to make him a confirmed invalid. You ought to rouse him out of his solitary habits, Dulcie. He is so clever—so superior to any one I know. It is a shame that he should lead such a hermit's life. Certainly there is hardly any one within twenty miles of Austhorpe fit to associate with him, unless it be this Mr. Haldimond, who seems tremendously clever.'

'Yes, he is clever and earnest and good. I wish my dear father would make a friend of him.'

'Well, perhaps he will in time, if he finds that you like him and are interested in his work. And now good-bye, darling; but remember it isn't because I am returning to the path of filial duty that you and I are to be parted. My life henceforward will oscillate between Blatchmardean and Fairview.'

The many-coloured month of May was drawing to a close by this time. Hawthorns whitened the woods and hedges, and filled the lanes with perfume. All the gardens were golden with berberis and wallflowers, and all the woodland glades were blue with wild hyacinths. The cuckoo had become a nuisance, and the skylark monotonously melodious, while the too-industrious woodpecker creaked and tapped and screwed to a maddening extent in every hollow beech tree. The little rustic world of Austhorpe was completely beautiful in its glory of spring blossoms, shining under sunny skies, and gently ruffled by softest

west winds; but perhaps only the village children were any the happier for all this beauty, or enjoyed themselves at this free banquet-table Nature had spread for them. For the grown-up people there was ever some cloud of care that shadowed the vivid colour of the flowers and darkened the glory of the sun.

Morton had slowly regained health and strength in body and mind. It had been a difficult and laborious recovery, attended by intense depression of spirits. He came back to life reluctantly, like a man who felt that death would have been a happy escape from a world of trouble. But youth and nature were stronger than the patient's will. The wild delusions of a fevered brain gradually departed, and left the dreamer face to face with stern reality. Natural sleep refreshed the worn-out frame; the prolonged idleness of convalescence tranquilized the overwrought mind, and before the rose-flushed hawthorn bloom had faded Morton was able to pursue the usual tenor of his industrious life.

During that weary period of recovery, Lizzie Hardman had shared with Aunt Dora in all the duties of nurse, attendant, and companion. Upon Lizzie, indeed, had fallen the greater part of the work, for Miss Blake's own health had suffered from her anxiety about her nephew, and she was herself in need of care and rest. But Lizzie was never tired. She read to Morton for hours, no matter how dry or heavy the book he wished to have read to him. She wrote at his dictation, and entered heart and soul into all his studies and plans for the advantage of his fellow-men; was able to discuss the most abstruse questions of political economy, and flung herself, with all a woman's headlong enthusiasm, into every philanthropic scheme. Her companionship, which seemed more like the *camaraderie* of a young brother student than the society of a girl, did much to lighten the tedium of that slow convalescence. Then she was so staunch and faithful, and although she never of her own accord talked to Morton about Dulcie, she always frankly and fully answered any questions which he chose to ask her.

Never, since that afternoon when death seemed so near, and recovery so unlikely, had Morton expressed a wish to see Dulcie; but on more than one occasion had he questioned Lizzie about her.

'Sir Everard and his daughter are still at Austhorpe, I suppose?' he said one morning, when Lizzie had laid down her book in order to give him the cup of strong beef tea which was to be administered with rigid precision at eleven o'clock every morning, whether the patient liked it or not.

'Yes, they are still here.'

'Do you ever see her?'

'I saw her yesterday coming away from the afternoon

service. The new curate has instituted a daily service at half-past four, you know. He was going to make it five, I believe, but people told him it would interfere with five o'clock tea, and would never be popular with the ladies, who form the chief part of a week-day congregation.'

'I see. And now they go to prayers first, and to tea and scandal afterwards. How was Dulcie looking when you saw her?'

'Pale, and grave, and quiet.'

'Not ill, I hope?'

'No, I do not know that she was looking ill; but she looks older and graver than she used to look in happier days.'

'Did you think she looked unhappy?'

'Yes, Morton. I will not tell you anything less than the truth. I am sure she is unhappy.'

'Poor child, I am very sorry for her. We have each our burden to bear. What must be must be.'

Morton told his aunt one day when they were alone together that his engagement had been cancelled at Sir Everard's desire.

'The man must be mad,' exclaimed Dora Blake impetuously.

'Can you, who have known him so long, who knew him in my father's life-time, imagine no reason he might have for desiring to break the engagement?' asked Morton, watchful of his aunt's countenance.

She remained silent for some moments, with a look of trouble in her expressive face.

'What reason could there be—what reason dating from the past—which did not exist when the engagement was made?'

'He may have yielded weakly to his daughter's wish for a time, till conscience awoke all at once and urged him to forbid our marriage.'

'Conscience?'

'Yes, Aunt Dora, conscience! What but a conscientious scruple of some kind, based on a guilty secret, could constrain him to break his daughter's heart and mine? But I am thankful to him for having taken the initiative. If he had not broken the engagement I must have done it. I could not have gone on suffering as I suffered, wilfully blind to a fact which forced itself upon me at every turn. Sooner or later my scruples must have grown stronger than my love, and I must, by my own act, have separated myself from Dulcie. How much harder for me to do so than for her father to part us? I ought to be grateful to him. It is the one honourable act of his life.'

'I do not understand you, Morton,' faltered Miss Blake.

'Yes, you do, aunt. Your pale cheek, your troubled eye, tell me that you do understand my meaning. You have the light of the past to guide you. You know much that is hidden from

me. You must—you do—know that Sir Everard Courtenay murdered my father.'

'Morton! how can you allege anything so horrible when that man's confession cleared Sir Everard for ever?'

'Cleared him. Then in your mind he was the suspected murderer until another confessed the crime.'

'I will not say one word, Morton.'

'Yes, you suspected—you knew—and yet you allowed me to engage myself to Dulcie!'

'What power had I to prevent that engagement? You had offered yourself to her before I knew that you had given her your heart. I had cherished other ideas, other hopes. The whole business came upon me as a surprise. As to my suspicions of Sir Everard, they were vague—shapeless—a mere undefinable terror to me, which I hardly dared own to myself. Vargas's confession and conviction set those horrible fears at rest for ever.'

'To my mind Vargas's confession opened a gulf down which I hardly dared to look while Dulcie was my affianced wife. Now——'

'You will not try to bring disgrace upon the father of the girl you love—for you do love her still, do you not, Morton?'

'With all my heart.'

'Even if you had ceased to love her, if she were nothing to you but that which she is to all who know her, a lovely and amiable girl, it would be a horrible thing to inflict disgrace upon her by bringing a hideous accusation against her father. What evidence have you to sustain this frightful suspicion? None, or none of a tangible nature.'

'God only knows what I shall do,' said Morton. 'I speak to you as I would speak to no one else, Aunt Dora; for I know that you share my suspicions.'

'Only because I knew that Everard Courtenay had been deeply wronged. You force me to speak of these things, Morton, to recall a past which were better buried and forgotten. You know how fondly I loved your father! yet I cannot deny that he dealt falsely and treacherously with Sir Everard Courtenay. Be wise then, Morton. Leave this sad story of the past in the shadow where it lies, and leave the punishment of your father's murderer to the Great Avenger.'

Morton was silent. This charge of falsehood and treachery brought against his father by one who had so deeply loved him was a heavy blow to the son. He knew Dora Blake's utter truthfulness, her strong sense of justice; and he knew that she would not bring such a charge as this against an idolized brother without undeniable evidence. Yet he ought, perhaps, to have been prepared for such a revelation. Could he, at any

moment, have supposed that groundless, unprovoked jealousy had made Sir Everard turn assassin? Only the belief in his friend's treachery, in a deep, irreparable wrong, could have goaded a sane man to such a crime. How far Sir Everard's belief in Walter Blake's guilt might have been justified by facts Morton had never asked himself until to-day. One image had ever been present to his mind, excluding every other consideration—the image of his murdered father, cut off in the prime and heyday of life.

No more was said either by aunt or nephew; but the recollection of that conversation sank deep in the young man's mind, and gave a new colour to his thoughts.

Had it not been for Lizzie Hardman he would in all likelihood have relapsed into that state of apathy and depression which had been the beginning of his dangerous illness. The mind, brooding perpetually upon one gloomy theme, would have again given way. But Lizzie would not allow him to be idle. She stimulated him in the pursuit of studies which were congenial to his mind and heart. She so warmly adopted his favourite ideas, so interested herself in his dearest schemes, that she infused new vigour and life into the old thoughts, and made the most Utopian plans appear practicable and full of hope. She urged him to publish a pamphlet upon compulsory education, a subject which he had taken deeply to heart, and upon which he had original and peculiar views. She offered to be his amanuensis, as he was not yet strong enough to bear the fatigue of much penmanship. At first he was unwilling to inflict such a task upon her, and doubted his own ability to give free expression to his thoughts in dictation; but Lizzie's interest in his work seemed so unaffected, her willingness to help was so sincere, that were it only to gratify her, he gave way, and the pamphlet was begun. First crude ideas were roughly jotted down, then the theme rounded itself in the thinker's mind and he began with a sentence worthy of Junius. Once begun, the work was easy. Morton lay on his sofa looking out at the lilacs and laburnums, the guelder roses and pink may, and dictating his thoughts in measured syllables; while Lizzie, who was a neat and rapid penman, sat at her little table by one of the windows, far enough from the thinker for him to be almost unconscious of her presence.

'Do you know, Lizzie, you are more like a sister to me than either of my sisters,' Morton said one day.

Lizzie was slow to acknowledge this compliment.

'I am glad to be useful to you in any way,' she said at last, 'for I owe you and yours so much that it is a happiness to be able to pay the veriest trifle—on account.'

'Don't be so horribly commercial, Lizzie. You owe us nothing, and need pay us nothing. I know you are auntie's right hand, and that she could not get on anyhow without you. But it was not your usefulness I was thinking about when I said you were like a sister to me. An amanuensis or a reader can be got any day at so much an hour; so I am not going to be intensely grateful on that score. What I feel is your companionship, your power of sharing and understanding all my ideas, your perfect sympathy.'

They were sitting in the twilight after dinner in the drawing-room. The two sisters were on the lawn playing a *tête-à-tête* game of croquet. Aunt Dora was reading by a distant window. Lizzie bent over her work, her face quite hidden in the dim light.

'What busy fingers!' exclaimed Morton. 'I don't think you know what idleness means.'

'I hope before we are many months older you will be busy at Blackford electioneering,' said Lizzie, with a laugh.

'What, you really think I ought to stand for Blackford at the first vacancy?'

'I am sure of it. You are the very man the Blackford people want to represent them. My cousin tells me that old Mr. Tilney, the Liberal member, talks of giving up his seat. He suffers from chronic asthma, poor man, and is ordered abroad every winter, so he might just as well resign his post to a man who can be useful to the town.'

'Well, if Mr. Tilney vacate his seat I will try my luck, Lizzie. I would do as much as that out of gratitude for all your goodness to me during the last six weeks.'

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE MAN CALLED TINKER.

THE time which Jane Barnard had appointed in her own mind for her return to America had come and gone, and she was still patiently drudging on in Mrs. Jebb's service, and was not one step nearer success. She wrote to her husband by every mail, and she wrote much more hopefully than she felt, lest he should lose patience and insist upon her immediate return.

Her residence under Mr. Jebb's roof had been so far barren of all result. The surgeon talked a great deal, and talked as freely before the American nurse as if she had been deaf and dumb; but there was no more substance in his talk by the domestic hearth than there had been in the coffee-room at the

Peacock. He had the air of knowing a great deal—of being able to unfold a terrible tale—were he inclined to do so, but his insinuations never came to a point. All his suggestions of a secret ended in nods, and shrugs, and lifted eyebrows, and smothered sighs, which, as Mr. Tomplin said, might mean anything or nothing. Mrs. Barnard was honestly fond of children, and she had attached herself to the youthful Jebbs, although they were by no means perfect specimens of juvenile humanity; yet as the weeks and months dragged on she began to weary of her exile, her service in a stranger's house, and began to yearn for the sight of her own children.

She had made up her mind to leave England before the end of May. She would obtain leave to see the prisoner at Portland before starting, knowing but too well that this farewell interview would be verily the last, and that she would never see the poor old erring father again; and then she would go to her happy home on the other side of the wide sea, and confess that she had failed in her mission. If in the days to come the story of her father's crime and punishment should be made a reproach against her children, they must bear their burden as she had borne hers. Every life must have its shadow as well as its sunshine; and if this were a darker shadow than falls upon most lives, it must be endured with patience and resignation. Jane Barnard told herself that she could do no more.

She had fixed the day of her departure, and had given due notice to Mrs. Jebb, who piteously bewailed the loss of one of the few good servants she had ever been blessed with; and now there remained but a week of her bondage in a strange land, and she was full of the thought of the husband and children at home, and the delight of seeing those dear faces after half a year's absence.

Domestic life at the Homestead had been unusually smooth during Jane Barnard's period of service. Polly, the cook, was a good-natured, flighty, gossiping girl, who did all her work in tremendous spurts, and idled prodigiously between whiles. With this Polly Mrs. Jebb carried on a continual struggle, which in a woman of sterner temper would have been actual warfare; but which with mild Mrs. Jebb never rose above plaintive remonstrance and tearful complaint. But with Jane Barnard Mrs. Jebb never complained, and Polly, the cook, declared that Jane managed her mistress. Jane was energetic and business-like, met all the petty difficulties of a narrow domestic sphere with calm resolution and perfect temper, and brightened the surgeon's home by her hopeful spirit and never-ceasing industry.

'It's very hard that when I get a servant who suits me so well she should go to America,' sighed Mrs. Jebb. 'And now

I have to look about me again, and Austhorpe servants are so bad.'

Mrs. Jebb's looking about consisted generally in making her wants known to the butcher and the baker, and then waiting till Providence should send her some kind of servant, bad, good, or indifferent, as the case might be.

But if Mrs. Jebb had reason to complain of the shortcomings of female servants, Shafto, for his part, declared that cooks and housemaids were angelic beings as compared with that pest of society, the outdoor man. He was perpetually at war with the man-of-all-work who looked after his horses, cleaned carriage and harness, occasionally drove a gig, and employed his leisure hours in working in the scrubby, untidy garden, given over for the most part to gooseberry bushes and cabbage stalks, which were not fair to look upon, but which were of some use in producing a nondescript leafy vegetable known as 'greens.' This office in Mr. Jebb's household had been filled and refilled many times during the surgeon's career, and was apt to be vacated suddenly with storm and tempest, the groom turning out either a hopeless drunkard or an incorrigible thief, or perchance a feeble creature who had never touched a horse till he took the situation, and for whom Mr. Jebb's two well-worked screws manifested their contempt by nearly kicking him to death on his first endeavour to valet them.

Of late, however, Mr. Jebb, like his wife, had been better off in this respect. The man who had the care of his stables knew his work and did it well. True that he was generally in a maudlin state every night, that his appearance was gaunt, and his private wardrobe better adapted for a scarecrow than for a human being. He could shuffle on Mr. Jebb's livery coat and thrust his thin legs into a pair of ancient top-boots when required so to disguise himself, and in this gear, handed on from groom to groom, he had something of the style and bearing of a well-trained servant.

'God knows where the man came from, or what he has been doing all his life,' said Shafto, 'but at some time or other he must have been in a gentleman's service. He has the stamp upon him even in his decay.'

No one knew where Tinker came from. Tinker was the name by which he insisted upon being known, yet every one had a rooted idea that it was a feigned name. Charged with want of candour on this subject he argued the question in this wise :—

'Nineteen year ago there were a hoss called Tinker won the Ledger, wasn't there?' he demanded ; and the person addressed being usually more or less ignorant was apt to reply in the affirmative.

'Very well, then,' answered the groom. 'If Tinker was a good enough name for him it ought to be good enough for me, didn't it?' whereupon no one felt able to gainsay him, and as Tinker he was generally accepted and received in that circle of society in which he was privileged to move.

He was a sententious person, and had strong opinions upon some subjects, but of his own antecedents he said never a word. He had turned up in the stable-yard of the Peacock one market day, and had there addressed himself to Mr. Jebb, as that gentleman was watching the harnessing of his horse by somewhat unskilled hands. He had heard somehow that Mr. Jebb wanted a groom, and offered himself for the place. As to character, well, no, he couldn't give any; he knew no one in those parts.

Mr. Jebb hesitated. Experience had taught him that a character with a servant is very much like a warranty with a horse, inasmuch as both are worthless. He told the man to call upon him that evening, and his last groom having been violently ejected the night before, leaving the stable-work on the surgeon's hands, he took the waif into his service on trial.

'If you don't suit you must go at the end of the week,' he said, to which the man calling himself Tinker agreed.

Tinker did suit, and Tinker stayed. He was a man of curiously exclusive habits, spending all his leisure in a wretched shed next the stable, which Mr. Jebb called his harness-room. Here, in company with boots and blacking brushes, a colony of empty bottles, and the well-worn harness, Tinker devoted his evenings to the perusal of any old newspaper which he could get hold of. He was not fond of society. When he drank he drank in the retirement of his own den, and needed not the charm of good company to give flavour to his liquor. The Three Sugar-Loaves knew him not. Perhaps he shrank from exhibiting his tattered rainment in such a prosperous tavern. Perhaps he was by nature and inclination a recluse.

All went smoothly in the stable. The horses were better groomed than they had been since Mr. Jebb had owned them; the harness was brighter, the general turn-out more creditable; and the surgeon congratulated himself upon his own discrimination in having picked up such a servant, and upon his own courage in having taken him without a character, when within a few days of Mrs. Barnard's intended departure Mr. Jebb made a discovery which wrought an appalling alteration in his feelings towards Tinker.

The wine-cellar at the Homestead was not a stately vault, nor was it stocked with a valuable collection of choice wines; but poor and dilapidated as the cellar was, and small though its contents were, Mr. Jebb kept the key of it himself, and guarded

its treasures with peculiar care. He had a good supply of Bass, and a bin of Highclere ale, bottled and laid down by himself. He had a dozen or so of port in case of illness, three or four dozen of sherry to give his friends; and at the end of the cellar, in a narrow arched recess deep in the old brickwork, he had a snug little stock of spirits, including a dozen of a very particular Scotch whisky which had been sent him as a present from a friend at Inverness. To make the security of this corner still more secure Mr. Jebb had built up a barrier of beer in front of the shelf where the whisky reposed, so that in the event of a burglarious intruder forcing his way into the stable the famous Scotch whisky would escape that intruder's attention. With a self-denial that approached the heroic, Mr. Jebb had resolved to let the mellowing influence of time soften and improve the spirit before he converted it into toddy.

'We'll keep it a year or two, my love,' he told his wife. 'I am not a whisky drinker, and I can afford to wait. It is a nice thing to know one has such good stuff in one's cellar.'

One rainy afternoon in this last week of May, Mr. Jebb returned from his daily round amongst outlying homesteads and distant villages, soaked to the skin, and with all the symptoms of influenza. He ordered a fire in the breakfast-room, and sat in his roomy armchair shivering, though wood and coals blazed merrily in the big basket-shaped grate.

'I'm chilled to the bone,' he explained, 'and I don't think anything but a jorum of hot spirits and water will warm me. Do you know, Emmie, my love, I've a deuced good mind to try that whisky.'

'Why shouldn't you, dear?' asked dutiful Mrs. Jebb. 'I'm sure I would if I were you. Nobody has a better right to it. I'll ring for the kettle while you go to the cellar.'

Mr. Jebb hesitated, and pulled his whiskers thoughtfully.

'I had made up my mind to keep that whisky two years; and I haven't had it more than six months. It seems weak to break into the dozen.'

'Not when it is a question of health, Shafto. I'm sure a good tumbler of strong toddy will cure that shivering of yours.'

'It isn't the shivering only,' said Jebb. 'I feel such a depression—I should be grateful to anybody who would blow my brains out.'

'Oh, pray get the whisky, Shafto. It's dreadful to hear the father of a family talk so wildly,' cried Mrs. Jebb, alarmed.

Her husband only wanted to be persuaded. He sighed, snuffled a little, felt in his pocket for his key, and went to the cellar.

There were no underground cellars at the Homestead. The repository in which Shafto kept his wine was on a level with

the dining-room, kitchens, dairy, apple-room, and various offices. This part of the old farmhouse was roomy enough for a retinue of servants.

The cellar was low and narrow and dark, a kind of arched passage under a back staircase. Shafto had provided himself with a lighted candle as he came along, and he now penetrated the sacred vault.

There was the neat wall of beer bottles, with their necks pointing outwards, a fortification in front of the whisky. It was rather troublesome to have to disturb them before the proper time, but Mr. Jebb felt that nothing less than toddy would subjugate an incipient influenza. He moved three or four of the bottles gingerly, and peered into the dusky recess behind.

'A blank, my lord.'

Where the red seals of the whisky bottles should have gladdened his eye, he beheld only darkness. He put in his hand, and felt only emptiness. Then, with hands that were tremulous with horror, he rapidly cleared out the range of beer bottles, and made himself master of the ruin behind.

Seven of the twelve whisky bottles were gone. And yet no burglar had invaded the house, nor had the key of the cellar been out of Mr. Jebb's possession. He stood with the candlestick in his hand, staring into empty space, utterly at a loss to account for the disappearance of his treasure.

Had Mrs. Jebb a duplicate key to the cellar, and a secret craving for ardent spirits? No, he could not so foully wrong the partner of his struggles as to suspect her of such infamy. Was this American nurse a traitor? Your confidential servant, a superior person, is often a smooth deceiver.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

I MUST BIDE MY TIME.

Mr. Jebb put his hand into the cavity where the seven bottles of whisky had been, and groped among the sawdust and cobwebs; not with the hope of making any discovery, but in utter helplessness and bewilderment. Suddenly, as his hand explored the brickwork, a new and awful light flashed on his mind. Four or five of the bricks had been loosened and removed, and put back again in their places. They yielded to his touch. He pulled them out one by one, and beheld a gap through which the robber could easily have put his hand and pulled out the bottles. The whole thing was clear: the theft had been but too easy. The cellar wall backed upon the stable yard, and anybody in that

yard could have removed the bricks. It must have been a work of time; a work to be done under cover of night and darkness; for it had to be so neatly done as to escape the master's eye. Who could have done this but the characterless groom, the waif, whose soddened appearance had impressed Mr. Jebb in the first instance, but to whose vices he had been willingly blind when he found that the man suited his purpose?

Mr. Jebb had not a doubt as to Tinker's guilt. He rushed out of the cellar, locking the door hurriedly. Alas! what availed lock or bolt when his wall had been violated? He hurried by the back door to the stable yard, heedless of the rain which fell upon his uncovered head, and unearthed Tinker in his shed among the empty bottles, harness, and boots.

The man smelt of whisky. Yes, the wretch reeked with the evidence of his crime. He had taken advantage of a wet afternoon to leave his harness uncleaned. He sat nodding over a newspaper, with an empty mug beside him; and mug and man alike sent forth the odour of choicest Glenlivat.

'You villain!' cried Shafto, 'what have you done with those seven bottles of whisky? You thief, you undermining vagabond, you—you Guy Faux! Get out of my place—begone—or I'll give you in charge for burglary. By heavens I'd do it, if I were not ashamed of my own folly in harbouring such a scoundrel.'

Tinker at first denied his guilt, then grew sullen, grumbled an oath or two, collected his few rags in a bundle, and walked out of the yard, Mr. Jebb escorting him. But on the threshold he stopped, snapped his fingers in the face of his late employer, and exclaimed:—

'Do you think I want your beggarly place? I can get a better in an hour if I like to ask for it. Sir Everard Courtenay will take me, I'll warrant. He wouldn't dare to refuse, knowing what I know.'

The man was tolerably far gone in whisky, drunk enough to be reckless, sober enough to know what he was saying.

Upon Shafto Jebb's ear the man's speech fell unheeded. His brain was fired by his great wrong, and he could think of nothing else. Seven bottles of that splendid whisky, the gift of a friend who was not likely to be again so generous! And to think that this wretch, by loosening a few crumbling old red bricks, had been able to get at the very spot in which Mr. Jebb had so carefully bestowed the choicest treasure of his cellar! The thing was fiendish.

'Get out of the place,' he roared, 'or I'll kick you out.'

'Not without my week's wages,' said the man.

'You may whistle for your wages. You've had seven bottles of my choicest whisky, and Heaven knows what besides. Get out, you house-breaking vampire.'

The man walked sulkily away, and, turning to go back to his violated cellar, in order to see how the brickwork could be most speedily made solid and secure, Mr. Jebb found himself face to face with Jane Barnard.

'Oh, if you please, sir, my mistress sent me out with your coat and hat, and will you go in directly, she says, for fear of adding to your cold?'

'Hang my cold!' cried Shafto savagely, 'I want a bricklayer.'

'A bricklayer, sir?'

'Yes, woman, a bricklayer, to wall up a cellar. Run down the village, and tell Dubbs the builder to send me his man directly, with a few new bricks and a hod of mortar.'

Mrs. Barnard did not wait to be bidden twice. There was a fine drizzling rain falling, and she had no covering on her neat, sleek head, except the little muslin cap which was her badge of servitude; but she ran out of the yard as fast as her active feet could carry her, and once outside, stopped and looked about her.

There stood the dismissed drudge, leaning against the palings of a cottage garden a little way down the road, despondently contemplative of a litter of black pigs which were walking up and down the prostrate form of their female parent as coolly as if she had been a grassy hill-side. Mrs. Barnard had to pass the man on her way to the builder's, and even if Mr. Jebb had been watching her, which he was not, it would scarcely have seemed strange that she should linger for half a minute to speak to him.

'I want a few minutes' talk with you,' she said. 'It will be for your advantage. Meet me at nine o'clock to-night, in the lane behind the Homestead.'

'You don't mean no harm agen poor old Tinker?'

'What harm should I mean? Haven't I always been kind to you?'

'You have,' whimpered the maudlin wretch, exhaling whisky. 'You're the right sort, and I'll trust you. Nine o'clock? I'll be there. I'll take a nap in old Hazel's hay-stack between whiles.'

Farmer Hazel's rick-yard was close to the surgeon's untidy kitchen-garden, the Homestead having once been the dwelling-house attached to Farmer Hazel's land.

Tinker seemed in earnest, and Mrs. Barnard was fain to believe him, and to go on with her day's work, waiting anxiously for nine o'clock, by which hour the children would be in bed, and the nurse might count upon a brief interval of freedom.

The rain had ceased after dark, and when Mrs. Barnard went out to keep her appointment the sky had cleared, and a few stars were shining through the gray. She told the cook she was going up the village to get some darning cotton at the shop, knowing

that as, in a general way, half an hour's gossip accompanied the smallest transaction at that compendious repository, she might be out for some time without exciting wonder by her absence.

She went down the narrow cinder path between the gooseberry and currant bushes, and rank overgrown onions, and let herself out by a little gate at the bottom of the garden, which opened into a narrow lane between the Homestead and Farmer Hazel's rick-yard. A little way down this lane stood the broad five-barred gate leading into the rick-yard, and on the top rail sat a slouching figure, which Mrs. Barnard knew must be that of the dismissed groom.

He had slept off his intoxication, and was now in a somewhat morose and depressed condition, the outlook before him being far from hopeful.

'Well, Mrs. Nurse,' he grumbled, as Jane Barnard approached him. 'Here I am a-dancing attendance upon your ladyship's pleasure, and yet I don't suppose you'll give me the price of a night's lodging.'

'There you are mistaken,' said Jane cheerfully. 'I am not quite so hard-hearted as you think. I'm a poor working woman, but as far as half a sovereign goes——'

'Half a quid,' cried Tinker. 'You're a duchess. Make it a whole one, and I'll say you're a reg'lar trump.'

'If you'll tell me what I want to know—speaking the truth fully and frankly—I'll give you a sovereign for your trouble; I'd do so even if it were the last coin I had in the world. When you were leaving the yard this afternoon you spoke of Sir Everard Courtenay—you spoke as if you knew something—something of his past history which he would not like everybody to know.'

The man was still seated on the gate, his shrunken figure bent nearly double, a short clay pipe in the corner of his mouth, from which he slowly sent forth a puff of rank tobacco now and then.

Mrs. Barnard stood close to him, holding the gate, speaking in a low, earnest voice.

The wind had risen since the rain had ceased, and the tall poplars in the hedgerow were rustling and creaking with a monotonous ebb and flow of sound, which prevented Mrs. Barnard or her companion hearing another sound near at hand, the fall of a stealthy footstep on the other side of the tangled blackberry hedge which screened Mr. Jebb's kitchen-garden from the vulgar gaze. The footsteps travelled slowly along the weedy path inside the hedge, and came to a dead stop just opposite the gate on which Tinker had perched himself.

'I'm not going to tell you what I know about him,' said Tinker, in a sullen tone. 'A quid, indeed! I should want forty

quids. Do you suppose I couldn't turn my knowledge to better account with the baronight himself?'

'I'm sure you couldn't.'

'Why?'

'Because if you'd been able to make money out of him in all these years, you'd have done it.'

'What do you mean by all these years?' asked Tinker, in tones of increasing surliness.

'I mean that whatever knowledge you have about Sir Everard Courtenay is knowledge that came to you twenty years ago last October.' The man flinched, and looked at the speaker sharply from under his shaggy brows. 'And that if you could have traded upon it in the meanwhile, you would have traded upon it. You're not the man to neglect a chance of that kind.'

Tinker gave an inward chuckle.

'You're about right,' he said. 'I should have screwed him uncommon tight if it hadn't been in his power to screw me. But I'll screw him yet, proud devil. I've got so low down that I'm pretty nigh as reckless as that man Vargas; and though I won't go so far as to put my neck in a noose, I might risk being a lifer if I could put a rope round that stiff neck of his.'

'Do it,' cried Jane Barnard, tremulous with excitement, and clutching the man's bony wrist with her nervous hand. 'Do it! I'll help you. Shall I tell you who I am? Yes, I will: and then perhaps you'll trust me, and help me. I am Humphrey Vargas's daughter. I want to prove that it was not he who murdered Mr. Blake. I want to clear his name of that crime if I can, for the sake of my children; or else when they grow up to be men and women and are working their way honestly in the world—to the front rank perhaps, for they live in a free country where there is nothing to keep them back—people will be able to bring it up against them that their grandfather was a murderer. I want to find the real murderer. I know who he is, and you know, and I believe Mr. Jebb knows, but it's only I that would risk my life to prove it.'

'Humph,' muttered the vagabond, looking at her curiously, as if such intensity of purpose were inexplicable to his jaded soul. 'You're a rum 'un. Supposing I could help you to bring the murder home to the right party. Supposin' it should suit my temper to stand up in a witness-box and tell what I know—what would you give me for the risk I ran?'

'My husband is in a small way of business, working hard for every dollar he earns; but if your evidence can clear my father's name of the stain of murder I will give you a hundred pounds.'

'How can I be sure of the money? Your husband's in America. When I've done what you want I may whistle for my reward. What security can you give me?'

Jane Barnard was silent. This question, which seemed a natural one for the man to ask, was a difficult one for her to answer. What security could she offer—a stranger in the land?

She could think of only one person who would be likely to help her in this matter, and that was Morton Blake. But even of his help she could not be certain; for heretofore he had been deaf to her pleading. Yet could she but offer him evidence of her father's innocence he could hardly refuse to help her. Might he not be more ready to do so now that the tie between him and Miss Courtenay was broken?

'If Mr. Blake were willing to be my security,' said Jane Barnard, 'would you believe me then?'

'I'd believe *him*,' grumbled the man. 'He's good for a hundred pound. You bring him to me at any place appointed, and let him give his word to pay me a cool hundred the day I give my evidence against Sir Everard Courtenay, and I don't mind risking the witness-box. For it is a risk to me. There's things might be brought up again me by people with plaguey long memories; but if I once get clean out of the court and my hundred down, I'd soon be clean out o' the country. And I should like to have a shy at Sir Everard before I kick the bucket. He was a trifle too high-handed with me twenty years ago, and I was a fool to take things as quietly as I did.'

'I will try to see Morton Blake to-morrow,' said Mrs. Barnard, 'and if your evidence is really worth having——'

'Worth having!' cried Tinker, who by recalling past injuries which had rankled in his mind for years had worked himself into a feverish condition; 'why, my evidence can prove that on the night of the murder Sir Everard Courtenay—a gentleman that was always regular and orderly in his habits, always one of the earliest to come home from the hunt,—never being more than a half-hearted sportsman—didn't get home till nine o'clock, and they'd killed their fox not six mile from Austhorpe at five, mind you, and rode into the stable-yard all over mud, with his horse dead beat and dead lame, and cut about as I had never seen any horse of his cut since I'd been second groom at Fairview.'

'Oh,' said Mrs. Barnard, 'then you were in his service at the time?'

'Of course I was,' answered Tinker. 'How should I have known anything about it if I wasn't? I was in the yard when he came in, waiting to take his horse; for the head groom had ridden off to Highclere, to get another doctor for my lady, who was lying dangerously ill. He was as pale as a ghost, and he just got off his horse, and chucked the bridle to me, and walked indoors without a word. I noticed that he'd lost one of his spurs, but I didn't think much about that. It was his looks and the

horse's condition that took my attention. "There's bad news for you indoors," says I to myself, "and you look bad enough already, just as if you knew what was coming." It was about an hour after when the groom came back, driving the Highclere doctor in Sir Everard's dogcart. They had passed the place where Mr. Blake had been found, and had heard all about the murder.'

'Did not the head groom, or any one else in the house, make any remark about Sir Everard's being out so unusually late?' asked Mrs. Barnard.

'I don't know that anybody did. You see the whole house was upset about my lady. She was lying at death's door, poor thing, and nobody could think of anything or anybody else. Before the clock struck twelve she was dead, and Austhorpe bell, that had been tolling for Mr. Blake, began to toll for her. That night was a fine harvest for the sexton.'

'Did you see Sir Everard next day?' asked Mrs. Barnard.

'No, he was shut up in the room with his dead wife. They say he hardly left her till her coffin was carried out of the house. Early next morning, pretty nigh as soon as it was light, I was at the place where the murder was done—I knew the spot by what Jake, the groom, had told me, close against the pollard oak—and there were the footprints of the men who had carried away the body, and the grass all trampled and beaten where the corpse had been dragged out of the ditch. I don't know what made me grope about and examine the place, for there wasn't much to see—idle curiosity I suppose; but the more I hung about the spot—the muddy ditch, and the broken hedge above it, and the bank, with the footprints of a horse sharpened off by a light morning frost,—the more I had Sir Everard and his white face, and his hunter all over muck and mire, in my mind. I couldn't give over puzzling myself why he should have been out so late on that particular night, and why he should have come home in such a state, him as was one of the neatest of riders, and used to bring his horse home as fresh as paint. I stood loitering about like, smoking my morning pipe, and looking at the place, when all at once I spied something glittering in the thick brambly hedge just below the ragged gap that showed where a horse had been over it. What could it be? Some of the plunder which the murderer had pitched there in his haste to be off. A pencil-case or a silver whistle, I thought: nothing much, or the fellow would have nobbled it. I sprang across the ditch, and scrambled up the bank, and parted the brambles, and there I found a spur stuck fast, with one of the straps and buckles hanging to it, just as it had been torn off, as the horse broke through the hedge. It was a tough blackthorn branch that had done it. I knew the spur for Sir Everard's by the make of it, and I should have known it for his anywhere, even if I had not noticed the missing

spur as he walked across the yard overnight. I put it into my pocket, and jumped back into the road just as the police-constable and his pal came up to search the place ; but I didn't say a word to either of them as to what I'd found. "Pretty clear where you was last night, Sir Everard, and what you was doing," says I to myself ; "you gentlefolks gives way to your evil passions just as often as the poorest of us, though all the catechism books teaches us different."'

'Did you tell any one what you had found?' asked Jane Barnard.

'No ; I kept turning the whole business over in my mind, for I wanted to find the way as I could best make my own account of it. If I was to up and tell everythink at the inquest, what should I be better off for my evidence? Not a mag. I might put a rope round Sir Everard's neck ; but that wouldn't put a coat on my back, or give me a dinner. My lay was to keep dark, and get all I could out of Sir Everard. "I've got you under my thumb," I said to myself, "and I'll make you pay the piper." Ay, and I'll make him pay yet,' he added with a savage chuckle, 'though the reckoning has been put off above twenty years.'

'How was it you failed to make him pay for your silence, then?' asked Mrs. Barnard.

'Never you mind. That's my business. Perhaps I didn't manage the affair as well as I might have done ; perhaps I carried things a trifle too high, and was too cocksure of his knocking under and bleeding freely. Anyhow, he rounded upon me ; and instead of having him in my power, I found it was me that was under his thumb ; and instead of getting a handsome price for my secret I got kicked out like a dog, and had to choose between cutting my lucky or getting into quod. There'd been a trifle of picking and stealing in the stables, you see, and I was in it as well as the rest—perhaps I was a little deeper in than the rest—and the upshot was that I found myself without a place and without a character, and with my gentleman's odd spur for my only portable property. Well, I was a careless, roving kind of dog in those days, and I didn't much mind where I went as long as I had snug quarters and good grub ; so I didn't feel getting the sack, and I thought I'd bide my time. I went into Leicestershire, and got a berth in a hunting stable ; for when a man can handle a horse as I could in those days, and is a smartish chap to look at into the bargain, character don't go for much. I told Lord Bullfinch's stud groom as I'd had a row with my master, and had got kicked out for cheeking him, and I was took on without another question ; and for the next ten years my life was pleasant enough, always falling on my feet somehow. But I was never the kind of chap

to save money, and by-and-by things began to go dead again me ; and then it was all down hill—never no change in my luck except from bad to worse—till the day your governor found me hanging about the yard of the Peacock, glad to earn a few pence for a night's shelter, or a mouthful of spirits to keep the rheumatics out of my wretched old bones.'

'And in all the days of your poverty did you never appeal to Sir Everard?'

'Didn't I, just? I wrote to him when I was hard up, pitching it very humble you know, and saying that though I knew facts connected with Mr. Blake's death as might be inconvenient for him to have bandied about, I was the last of men to make use of my knowledge, but that I was in an awful fix for a ten-pound note, and must get it some ways or other. At first he was civil, and used to send me the money ; but without a word, just as you'd throw a dog a bone. Then one day there comes a letter from his valet, to say that Sir Everard having been lately imposed upon by various begging-letter writers, had made up his mind to take no further notice of any such appeals, and that if I wrote again he would place the matter in the hands of the police. Rough upon me, wasn't it? Well, I didn't write again : but I contrived one day to waylay my gentleman just as he was leaving the Town Hall at Highclere after a magistrates' meeting. He looked uncommon proud and uncommon handsome as he came out of the hall, with his figure well set up, and his head held high, swinging a heavy cane hunting crop as he walked along. He'd left his horse at the Peacock, and it was in the narrow lane that leads from the Town Hall to the market-place —a short cut, don't you know—that I accosted him. I'd followed him into the lane, and it seemed a nice retired spot for me to say what I had to say. Well, there's no need to go into our conversation. Instead of giving me a civil answer he turned upon me like a devil, clutched me by the collar, and, getting me into an angle of the wall where I had no more power to fight him than if I'd been a baby, he belaboured me with his hunting crop till there was hardly enough life in me to shriek murder. He threatened that if ever I dared to address him again he'd beat me in the same way. He laughed at what he called my impudent pretence of knowing something that might injure him if it were known to all the world. Of course there was no policeman on the scene till my gentleman had gone, and there was I, with every bone aching, to get my revenge as best I might. "Take out a summons against him for assault and battery," says the constable. "Yes, but where's the witness to prove my case?" asks I. What would have been the good of my taking my poor old bones before a magistrate to swear the peace against such a fine gentleman as Sir Everard Courtenay. "No

my man," says I, "it's a case of grin and bear it. I must bide my time."'

The church clock chimed the half-hour.

'I must get back to the house,' said Mrs. Barnard. 'There's the tray to be taken into the parlour for Mr. Jebb's grog.'

It was the surgeon's custom to comfort himself before going to bed with the light refreshment of a glass of gin and water and a biscuit or two. Jane Barnard brought out a well-worn leather purse, from which she extracted some silver.

'Here are five shillings,' she said. 'Get yourself a supper and a bed at the Sugar-Loaves, and meet me at three o'clock to-morrow afternoon on Tangley Common, just in front of the Manor House gates. I shall have seen Mr. Blake, most likely, by that time, and shall know what is the best way of going to work.'

'The man turned the shillings over in his palm with a dissatisfied air.

'You said you was going to stand a quid,' he muttered. 'Five bob ain't much after waiting your convenience all these blessed hours.'

'It's more than enough to get you a supper, a bed, and a breakfast,' answered Jane firmly, 'if you don't waste any of it upon drink. If I were to give you more you'd go muddling your brains with spirits, and I want you to have all your wits about you to-morrow. Remember, I mean to carry this business through.'

'So do I,' answered the man, 'but I must be paid for my trouble. I shall expect a pound or two from you to-morrow, mind.'

'You shall have it. Good-night.'

'Good-night,' growled Tinker.

Mrs. Barnard ran back to the house, and began bustling about the kitchen getting her tray ready. The kettle was boiling on the hob, ready for the evening potations.

'Well, if you haven't stopped gossiping above a bit,' exclaimed the cook, looking up from a greasy copy of last week's *News of the World*, where she had been spelling out a diabolical murder in Whitechapel. 'You must have found Mrs. Simcox uncommon pleasant. What was you talking about?'

'Old times,' answered Jane briefly.

She carried the tray and tea-kettle to the family sitting-room, but to her surprise Mr. Jebb, whom she had last seen ensconced in his arm-chair, with his feet on the fender and a Cashmere shawl tied round his head, was no longer there.

'Has master been sent for, ma'am?' she asked of the patient wife, who sat at her Penelope task of darning stockings which her active children trampled into holes as fast as she mended them.

'No, Jane, I didn't hear of anybody calling for him. He

went into the surgery a little while ago to make up some medicine, and I dare say he's there now.'

Mrs. Barnard opened the surgery door and peeped in. The oil lamp was burning low on the counter where Mr. Jebb pounded his drugs and rolled out his pills, and the room was empty.

'He's not there, ma'am,' said Jane.

'Then I suppose somebody sent for him. I thought I heard the door shut half an hour ago. And now he will go increasing his cold. And he is so cross when he has one of those influenza colds. Do you see if his coat and hat are gone off the peg, Jane?'

'Yes, ma'am. They're gone.'

'I wonder who could have wanted him? He told me this afternoon he wouldn't budge for anybody. But the loss of that whisky made him quite wild. I never saw him so put out since I can remember; and then he stood in the rain ever so long watching the bricklayer mend the wall. I'm afraid he'll be ill.'

Mrs. Barnard was too full of her own thoughts to be properly sympathetic. She stirred the fire, swept the hearth, set the tray in its proper place, keeping silence all the while. Then, just as she was going to leave the room she said,—

'Oh, if you please, ma'am, could you let me have a couple of hours to myself to-morrow? I want to go out for a little, after the early dinner.'

'Well, yes, Jane. I suppose I must spare you.'

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

TINKER BREAKS HIS TRYST.

On the next day after Jane's long conversation with Tinker, Morton Blake received the following brief note, just as he was beginning his breakfast:—

'Humphrey Vargas's daughter, Mrs. Barnard, who called upon Mr. Blake a few days after her father's trial, will take the liberty of calling again to-day at half-past two o'clock. She earnestly begs Mr. Blake to receive her, as she has a communication of the utmost importance to make to him.'

This was a startling letter for Morton Blake. He had supposed until this moment that Mrs. Barnard had gone quietly back to America soon after her father's fate had been decided; and here she was at his door, eager to make some mysterious communication, perhaps to goad him to that course of action which

was always present to his mind, but from which he shrank with ever-increasing horror.

Since his conversation with his aunt, his heart had inclined more to mercy than to vengeance. She had shown him the story of the past in a new light—his father, the betrayer rather than the betrayed—his father's violent death a savage act of vengeance, and not a cold-blooded murder. Was it, indeed, thus that stern justice, holding her inflexible scales between the murderer and the murdered, would compel him to consider that crime which had smitten Walter Blake in the flower of his age, and left the son, who so fondly loved him, fatherless? His blood boiled within him when he remembered that cruel death—but when he thought of a husband's wrongs, a bosom-friend betrayed, he could almost have pitied the assassin. And to strike Sir Everard would be to crush Dulcie, to inflict a life-long grief upon that tender, loving heart, to poison the current of the fair young life, to blast every joy and every hope of the innocent soul. Could he do this?—he, Morton Blake, who had so dearly loved her, who believed that he must go on loving her till the end of his days? No. His hand should not strike the blow. His lips should not utter the words which were to wither the life that was so precious to him. Whatever his duty to the dead might be, his duty to the living was even more sacred. He had seen the whole thing in a new and holier light since he and Dora Blake had spoken together plainly. That long, weary illness, and the still more weary return to health, had given him ample leisure for self-communion, for thinking out the question of the future in its every aspect. Perhaps that awful consciousness of having been so near death had also exercised a softening influence upon his mind, and helped to bring about the change of feeling which had arisen since the October night when he paced the gardens at Fairview, thirsting for the blood of his father's murderer.

'My poor, sweet, loving Dulcie,' he thought, full of tenderness for his lost love. 'Let me think how my father, the most chivalrous of men, would have me deal with you, could he see our position and all its difficulties. Would he bid me avenge him, at the price of your broken heart? Would he, whose one sin was to have loved your mother too dearly, have her daughter's life blighted?'

In such a mood as this Morton Blake looked forward with the utmost distaste to his interview with Mrs. Barnard. He decided upon receiving her, and hearing all she had to say; but he was pre-determined as to his own course.

He had come of late to face the future with a settled purpose to make the best of a life out of which, as he believed, all gladness had gone for ever. He saw no possibility of happiness,

no prospect of new ties. He had loved and done with love. He had outlived all passionate hopes, all tender dreams. But happily ambition—which he called the desire to be useful to his fellow-men—was not dead in him. The embers of that manly fire had burned very low, but Elizabeth Hardman had fanned them into flame. Encouraged by her he had taken up the theme of national education, which had always been near his heart. At first he had worked with a dull, stolid determination to plough through his subject, however faint his interest, however weary his soul. But very soon that earnest love of work which was in his very nature had asserted itself, and toil and study had again been made sweet to him.

'I think now that the dearest hopes of my life have been disappointed, I am just the right kind of man for the House of Commons,' he told Lizzie Hardman; 'a machine capable of so many hours' work every day, with no foolish longings for leisure or the sweet frivolities of domestic life, a man made of cast-iron, and always in working order.'

And now just when he had become wholly absorbed in public work, and when the idea of the approaching contest at Blackford had put darker thoughts out of his mind, here was Jane Barnard, with all the painful associations that were inseparable from her name.

She was shown into Morton's study, where he was sitting at his desk alone. He had been unable to go on with his work, in nervous expectation of her coming, and had spent a comparatively idle morning, reading first newspapers and then books in a desultory way which was the very reverse of his usual method.

'I did not like to refuse to see you,' he said, rising to receive her, and motioning her to a chair opposite his desk, 'yet I would gladly have avoided an interview which can only result in pain to both of us. Please state, as briefly as you can, the facts which you wish me to know.'

'I will not be longer than I can help, but I must tell you the story almost as it was told to me, and I must tell you the kind of man from whom I heard it.'

And then, deliberately and clearly, she described the surgeon's groom, his dismissal, and his departing boast about Sir Everard. She told Morton how her curiosity had been roused by this mention of Sir Everard's name, she already believing him to be the murderer, and how she had met the man later and got from him the whole story of his suspicions. She grew more energetic as she proceeded with her statement. Her eyes fired, her cheek glowed with suppressed passion. She expected to find a responsive warmth in Morton Blake; but to her surprise and mortification she found him cold as ice.

'Do you believe this story?' he asked.

'Why should I not? It agrees with my own suspicions. I have never forgotten what I was told by a person who was present at my father's trial. He described the counsel's cross-examination of Sir Everard, and how he looked when those questions were asked.'

This story of the lost spur tallied curiously with Shafto Jebb's assertion that the man who killed Walter Blake was on horseback, and had jumped the hedge after the murder. But, in spite of this correspondence between the two stories, Morton affected to laugh the groom's statement to scorn.

'Who is to believe a drunkard and a thief against a gentleman of Sir Everard's position? If the fellow had been an honest man he would have come forward at the inquest and told his story.'

'The man's character is bad enough, but that cannot alter the fact. I believe he has told the truth, and he is prepared to make his statement before a magistrate if——' Mrs. Barnard hesitated a little, feeling that she was about to weaken her case —'if he is paid for his trouble.'

'Yes, of course, the fellow has trumped up this story in order to trade upon it. He knew who you were—knew that you were inclined to suspect Sir Everard, and he has invented this story to get money out of you. I wonder you could be so easily gulled.'

'You are mistaken, Mr. Blake. He did not know who I was until he had hinted at the knowledge of Sir Everard's secret. I told him my name then, to convince him that I was in earnest. But you can help me if you like. You must help me. This time I will take no denial. It is your duty, as your father's son, to sift this story. I want you to see and hear this man, and judge for yourself.'

'How and when am I to do that?' asked Morton reluctantly. He was horrified at this new revelation, worthless as he affected to consider it.

'Now—immediately. Yes,' said Mrs. Barnard, glancing at the clock on the chimney-piece, 'it is five minutes to three, and I told him to meet me on the common in front of your gates at three o'clock. Will you come with me to meet him?'

Morton took up his hat and went out with her through a French window opening into the garden. They went across the lawn and out at a wicket gate. There lay the common before them, a wide breezy expanse, with nothing higher than a furze bush to obscure the view.

There were some cows feeding, jingling their bells as they moved slowly over the short turf; there were some village children in the distance playing on the edge of a gravel pit; but of Tinker, the groom, there was no trace.

'You won't mind waiting a few minutes, will you, Mr. Blake?' Jane Barnard asked piteously.

'I don't mind waiting an hour. Having once consented to see the fellow, I am prepared for anything: but it looks very much as if he were not coming.'

Mrs. Barnard made no answer. She looked across the open landscape, where there was no sign of any approaching figure, which even delusive hope might mistake for Tinker. Could he mean to play her false? Surely not, when he had so much to gain by aiding her projects. Rigid punctuality was hardly to be expected from a man of his class, unprovided with any timekeeper in the shape of a watch.

Morton walked slowly up and down the turf in front of the sunk fence which divided the Manor House grounds from the common. He walked to and fro, busy with his own thoughts, and taking very little notice of Jane Barnard, who sat upon a hillock, watching the road that led from Austhorpe to the gates of Tangley Manor. In this silent way, each full of care and thought, they waited for an hour.

'Four o'clock,' said Morton, looking at his watch. 'I think I have given your witness a fair chance. You have evidently been fooled by a rogue, who played upon your feelings. I am sorry for you, because I believe you are honest in your assertion of your father's innocence—but I can do nothing to help you—and I must beg that you will not make any further appeal to me. You would only worry me without doing yourself any good.'

'He must have been bribed to keep away,' exclaimed Mrs. Barnard, almost frantic with disappointment and mortification. 'He must have gone to Sir Everard after he left me last night, and sold his evidence to a higher bidder. Yet after what he told me of Sir Everard's treatment of him, that seems incredible.'

'One thing is very clear,' said Morton. 'He has cheated you. Good morning.'

He turned on his heel and left her, to go back to Austhorpe, cruelly disappointed. She had believed herself on the threshold of success. And now she seemed as far away from her end as ever; and she began to think that she must once more resign herself to the knowledge that she had failed in her mission, and go quietly home again by the ship in which she had intended to sail, until last night's revelation had altered all her ideas.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

DRIFTING APART.

Life at Fairview was going on in the old, quiet way. Sir Everard had made but little change in his habits since his return from Algiers. The only difference was that he lived more alone, and spent much of the time that of old he had given to his daughter in the seclusion of his own study. Dulcie felt the change, but she offered no protest against it. She and her father seemed to have drifted imperceptibly from the old, happy, familiar companionship into reserve and strangeness. He no longer spent the idle hour or so before dinner lounging in one of Dulcie's comfortable arm-chairs while she played to him; and Chopin's mournful melodies seemed sadder than ever now that Dulcie sat alone at her piano.

Of the gradual decay in Sir Everard's health and strength there could be no question. He had the air of a man whose days are numbered, and who knows that the number thereof is small. It might be a question of months, or even years; but that idea of an indefinite lease of life which a man has while his limbs retain their vigour, and his heart beats sound and strong, was at an end for ever. He had been to London since his return, to see the famous doctor who, last December, had pronounced, with delicate ambiguity, that oracular sentence which the patient knew to mean his death warrant; and the physician had instructed him in the art of spinning an attenuated thread to the fag end. But this process of spinning out the thread was a weary one, and Sir Everard's soul revolted against it, even although he obeyed.

He was to live quietly, to court repose, perfect tranquillity of mind and body, above all other earthly blessings, since in that lay his sole chance of prolonging his life.

'I have led a secluded life for the last twelve years,' said Sir Everard, 'with no amusements or excitements of any kind. I have lived alone, with my books and my daughter.'

The physician looked at him with an incredulous smile, as who would say, 'Why will my patients persist in lying to me, when it is so easy for me to find them out?'

'You tell me so,' he said gravely, 'and I cannot gainsay you; but your heart tells of violent agitations—of an organization worn out by passionate emotion and mental pain.'

Dulcie might have drooped and died from sheer loneliness and melancholy in those days, had it not been for Lady Frances Grange and her brother. Frances having once put her hand to the plough was not the kind of young woman to let go until she had made her furrow. Having promised Sir Everard to be a friend and a sister to Dulcie she was resolutely bent upon keeping

her word. She came to Fairview two or three times a week, and she insisted upon Dulcie driving her ponies to Blatchmardean almost as often. Thus the two girls rarely spent the day apart, and this companionship absorbed the greater part of Dulcie's leisure, since her mornings were chiefly devoted to visiting among the poor, and teaching in the school. Of late she had given herself up to this work with a perseverance and self-abnegation which she had scarcely shown in happier days, tender and affectionate as she had ever been in her care for the poor and the suffering. But now that all the hope and gladness had gone from her own life, the cares and joys of others were the chief occupation of her mind. She shrank from all thoughts that turned inward. She was glad to be busy about other people's business. Those long mornings at her easel or her piano, which had once been so sweet to her, would now have been full of pain, since they would have given her leisure for thought.

Had she been left to herself in the time of her first great sorrow she would hardly have made so noble a stand against the selfish grief which broods and despairs; but she was urged to action and sustained in her course by a new friend who had a strong influence upon her mind. This was Mr. Haldimond, who, from the hour he first saw her face, had determined to rescue her from the slough of despond into which she was falling, to make life bright and pleasant to her once again. Not for a moment did he give her reason to suspect that he knew her story, or that he was going out of his way to console her. He appealed to her in the cause of others; he sought to interest her in the sorrows of others; he made her believe that he wanted her help among his poor and could not get on without it; and she responded nobly to his call. If he saw any sign of flagging, any willingness to fall back upon her lonely days at Fairview, he was at her side to stimulate her to exertion. She walked and drove many a mile in the course of her charitable visits, and the pretty roan ponies were known far afield in distant cottages on the remotest edge of the sparsely-populated parish. Sometimes she was inclined to doubt her power to do good, except in the substantial form of benevolence which ministered to the bodily wants of the poor; but when she hinted at her incapacity, and expressed her fears to Arthur Haldimond, he gave her such warm assurance that she was fain to believe him.

'You think because you cannot preach and dogmatize to these poor creatures that you are doing no good,' he said. 'That is a great mistake. You influence them for good in a world of ways. Your bright face, your innocence of all evil, your gentleness of manner, all these have a purifying, elevating effect, which poor people feel without being conscious of it. They would not utter a coarse, unholy word in your presence

on any account; and gradually, if they see you often, they will leave off coarse, bad language altogether. They would not like to be rough with their children before you, who are so gentle; and by degrees the habit of gentleness will grow upon them. The education of imitation goes on all through life; and what is to become of those poor creatures who never see anything beautiful or gracious that they can imitate? Believe me, dear Miss Courtenay, your trouble is not thrown away. In several cottages where you have been I have seen a new brightness in the furniture, flower-pots in the windows, a nosegay on the table, as if things had been smartened up to do you honour—and if you leave a palpable trace of this kind, be assured you leave some trace of your goodness in the hearts of those you talk with. Why, the fact that these people love you and are anxious for your visits, ought in itself to be a sufficient reward.'

'Yes,' faltered Dulcie, looking ashamed of herself, 'I am very ungrateful. I do love them all, poor things, and it is very nice to know they are glad to see me.'

Mr. Haldimond came to Fairview as often as the many duties of his parish would allow him, and he was one of the few people whose society Sir Everard enjoyed. The curate was a scholar, a man of wide culture; and scholars were rare within a ten-mile radius of Austhorpe, in which rural district men gave their minds chiefly to sport and agriculture, and thought they knew all that life could teach them when they had learnt how to choose a horse, and were acquainted with the elements of farriery. Mr. Haldimond was made welcome at Fairview. He dropped in whenever he liked; and it seemed to Dulcie that her father was always happier and more at his ease with her when Mr. Haldimond was present than when he and she were alone. If the curate came in at tea-time Sir Everard would join him in the morning-room, where Mr. Haldimond unconsciously had appropriated to himself Morton's particular chair. He was a desperate tea-drinker, and had almost lived upon tea and bread and butter during his busy life in Whitechapel.

'My dinner was always a moveable feast,' he said gaily, 'and there were days when I forgot to dine. But at whatever hour I came in my housekeeper always brought me a pot of strong tea, and a plate of substantial bread and butter; and you have no idea how well I throve upon that school-girl diet. I had no such luxuries as you give me, Miss Courtenay, none of these daintinesses in the way of cake and toast. I am afraid you and Austhorpe are spoiling me for the battle of life.'

'You seem to work very hard at Austhorpe,' said Dulcie, 'though you came here to rest.'

'I could not live without work of some kind; but here I only

play at working. You have no idea what work means in a London back-slum—or of the despair that creeps into a man's mind when he finds himself in the middle of a world where everything is wrong, and feels his incapability of setting it right.'

'But I dare say you did a great deal of good?' said Dulcie

'I did what I could. I rolled the big stone a little way up the hill. I filled a few of the bottomless buckets. I cleansed one little corner of the Augean stable, and I dare say by this time that particular corner is just as dirty as all the rest. Yes, Miss Courtenay, it is disheartening work. You, who live among green fields, where something of the freshness and simplicity of nature still remains in the hearts of men, can hardly imagine the horror of London poverty.'

Everybody at Austhorpe liked Mr. Haldimond. His cheerful, energetic, active temperament contrasted delightfully with the languid graces of Mr. Mawk, who, finding that he would not be allowed to carry out his own particular ritual in all its fulness, had contented himself with a very sleepy performance of his duties, reserving all the forces of his intellect for future exercise in a more congenial sphere. The parish had thus been in a great manner left to take care of itself, and it awakened to new life under Mr. Haldimond's vigorous administration.

Dulcie was very glad that Sir Everard should make a friend of the new curate—indeed, he of all men was the friend she would have chosen for her father; for she had a strong belief in his goodness, his wide sympathy with all human sorrow.

Not once had the father and daughter talked confidentially together since their home-coming. Each seemed carefully to avoid unreserved conversation. When they talked together it was always of indifferent matters, of art, or literature, or the events of the day. Of their own lives, their own feelings, neither spoke.

One day Sir Everard told Dulcie that he meant to take her to Egypt in the late autumn.

'My doctor says Egypt will suit me,' he said, 'and I dare say you will like to go there.'

'Very much. I have always wished to see Egypt.'

'I am glad of that. And in the meantime, now that you have an agreeable friend in Lady Frances, I suppose you will not mind staying at Fairview.'

'No, papa, I am quite content to be at Fairview.'

This was true, for although Dulcie had felt at first that it would be intensely painful for her to be in the neighbourhood of her discarded lover, that the knowledge that he was near her, the dread of meeting him would make life a burden, she had gradually grown accustomed to the idea that all was ended

between them, and had begun to think of her engagement as a thing of the past. It seemed so long ago since she had been utterly happy in the gladness of a girlhood that had lacked no blessing which earth can give. She thought of herself and her bygone happiness as if she had been thinking of another person. She thought of the Morton Blake whom she had known and loved as some one who had passed from this earth altogether. A Morton Blake remained, but not the one who had loved her. She fancied she could meet him and speak to him as to a stranger, almost without a pang; so completely had she resigned herself to the idea that their parting was irrevocable, that under no circumstances could they ever renew the broken tie.

She met Dora Blake one day in the village, and paused shyly, blushing crimson, and afraid to speak. But Miss Blake took both her hands, and held them lovingly, looking at her with unaltered affection.

'Why, Dulcie, were you going to pass me by?' she exclaimed.

'I did not know what to do,' faltered Dulcie, with tears in her eyes. 'I thought you might be angry with me.'

'Angry with you? No, sweet love. Whatever might happen I should never blame you. I know my Dulcie's lovely character too well. I am sorry, dear, very sorry, that things should have fallen out as they have, but I cannot blame you for obeying your father.'

Not one harsh word about Sir Everard. Dulcie felt unspeakably grateful.

'Dear Miss Blake, you are always good. You are able to pity and understand every one. I hope Tiny and Horatia are not very angry with me.'

'Tiny is apt to be a little unreasonable,' said Miss Blake, 'and Horatia has rather a hard way of looking at things. But they were always fond of you, dear, and I think what they feel most is being deprived of your society. I should like to come and see you, love, but I feel that it is better for me to stay away. Your father might think that I was trying to bring you and Morton together again. In any case I do not think he would care to see me at Fairview.'

Dulcie felt in her heart that Miss Blake was right.

'It is a sad loss for me,' she said. 'There is no one—after my father—that I love better than you. I am ever so much happier now I know you have not turned against me.'

Dulcie went home with her heart considerably lightened, and played lawn tennis with Frances Grange, Lord Beville and Mr. Haldimond, with something of her old gaiety. The sunk lawn below the terrace at Fairview was admirably adapted for tennis, and Frances had insisted upon two afternoons a week being set

apart for the game. She told Mr. Haldimond that if he chose to play he would be welcome, though he was such a tremendous swell that he made the whole contest ridiculously one-sided; and if he didn't choose to join them they must find some obliging nonentity to make a fourth; but it happened somehow that Mr. Haldimond could always find time for a game of tennis at Fairview, and a cup of tea afterwards; sometimes in the morning-room, sometimes in a delightful little circular tent which Frances had persuaded Dulcie to set up between two great cedars on the upper lawn.

On this particular afternoon, when Dulcie had been cheered by her meeting with Miss Blake, the curate was delighted at the new brightness of her face. He had been watching and waiting for the lifting of the cloud that veiled her beauty; and now he fancied the shadow was passing away, and that he should see her as Mrs. Aspinall had described her to him, in the radiance of her joyous girlhood.

'She is beginning to forget Morton Blake,' he thought. 'I wish the man were a thousand leagues away, instead of being at her door.'

Beville was devoted in his attentions, following Dulcie like her shadow; but, alas for the young man's hopes, she accepted his devotion as carelessly as if he had been some affectionate Newfoundland or impressionable collie, frisking and leaping about her. She took his complimentary speeches as so many tremendous jokes, laughing at them heartily, and she treated him as cordially as if he had been her brother.

'It's no use, Fan,' he told his sister despairingly, when that young lady tried to inspire him by assuring him of Sir Everard's approval. 'What's the good of the father being friendly to me if the daughter doesn't care a straw for me? And I know she doesn't. That parson fellow has as good a chance as I.'

The words had an ominous sound to Frances Grange's ear. What if the curate had a better chance than Beville? What if he were about the most dangerous rival who could have appeared upon the field? He was handsome, of noble presence, a thorough gentleman, cultured, widely read, travelled, interesting in every way; and Fanny knew that he was deeply interested in Dulcie.

'He must be got out of the way somehow,' she said to herself, 'or Beville will not have the ghost of a chance. I must warn Sir Everard of the danger.'

She took an early opportunity of being alone with the baronet for a few minutes on the terrace while the others were loitering on the tennis lawn.

'Dear Sir Everard,' she began, sidling up to him in her pretty, coquettish way, being perfectly at ease with him by this time, and having a lurking idea that he liked her and thought

all her ways charming, 'I am going to take a most awful liberty. I hope you won't be too dreadfully angry.'

'I don't think it is in my power to be angry with you; unless you were to desert poor Dulcie and turn your back upon Fairview.'

'*Pas de danger*,' said Fanny, with a smile and a sigh. 'I am too happy here. But I have been thinking—oh, please don't be cross—I have been thinking that if you really would like Dulcie to marry Beville you are hardly wise in encouraging such an attractive person as Mr. Haldimond to make himself at home here. Please don't fly out at me!'

Sir Everard showed no disposition to any savage outburst, nor did he seem half so much surprised and concerned as Lady Frances expected him to be. He only looked gravely meditative, and he answered her in his gentlest tone.

'I should like Dulcie to marry Beville,' he said, 'for I believe he is a good, true-hearted young fellow, and that he would make her happy. I am still worldly-minded enough to wish that my daughter should be Countess of Blatchmardean, and that her inheritance should help to restore the fortunes of a noble family. But if to be your brother's wife now, and a countess by-and-by, be not her surest road to happiness, I will forego my own scheme, pleasant as it is to me. I want her to be happy. I want to see the old brightness come back to her face before I die. I want to be sure that she has a faithful protector, a shield and defence against all earthly troubles. If I am not to see her happy in my way I should like to see her happy in hers: and if she would rather be a country parson's wife than an embryo countess, I must bow to fate.'

'You were not so indulgent about Morton,' said Frances, with a touch of vexation.

She was so grieved on Beville's account that she could not refrain from inflicting this little stab.

Sir Everard gave her a darker glance than she had ever had from him.

'I think I told you some time ago that I had my own reasons for my conduct in that matter, and that I did not care to be questioned about them,' he said coldly, and poor Frances felt that her zeal had carried her too far.

The fact was that Sir Everard was better aware than anybody else of Arthur Haldimond's growing influence upon his daughter's life. He saw that Haldimond was doing that which he the father felt himself powerless to do. He was diverting Dulcie's mind from her sorrow; he was giving her that active share in the life and cares of others which is the best distraction for a troubled mind. And if a warmer feeling should grow out of this interest, if the adviser and friend should ripen into the

lover, Sir Everard was prepared to accept the result, and to be thankful.

'I only want her to be happy,' he said to himself. 'I have destroyed her first hopes; I have blighted her girlhood. Would to God that I might see her secure of a happy womanhood before I go.'

CHAPTER XL.

THE END OF ALL THINGS.

Mr. Jebb's cold became much worse after Tinker's dismissal. He had been guilty of extreme imprudence on the night which followed that domestic revolution. Summoned suddenly by one of his distant patients, he had gone out on foot, and had stayed out till after midnight, much to the discomfiture and alarm of his devoted wife. The natural consequence of this disregard of self showed itself in a violent influenza, which kept Mr. Jebb confined to his bed for two days, half-smothered under a mountain of blankets, with his head swathed in flannel—and his patients left to their fate.

This self-devotion of Mr. Jebb, in going forth from his fireside at the call of duty, after having made up his mind to stay at home and nurse himself, was a new development of character which sorely puzzled Jane Barnard.

During her residence under the parish doctor's roof she had seen quite enough of him to know that unselfishness was not his dominant quality. He was fairly good-natured, in an easy-going, self-indulgent way, but self was assuredly the central figure in his own particular plan of the universe, and nothing less likely than that he should peril his own health by a muddy walk of four or five miles out and home, in order to give the solace of his skill to an unimportant patient.

The more deeply Mrs. Barnard considered the matter the more did she incline to connect Mr. Jebb's absence from the domestic hearth with the mysterious disappearance of Tinker. She had made inquiries at the 'Three Sugar-Loaves,' and had there learnt that Tinker had knocked up the house at a quarter past eleven, and had asked for a night's lodging; that he was obviously the worse for liquor, and had therefore been refused such accommodation, whereat he had resorted to language of a particularly savage and blasphemous character, and had gone his way. From that hour no one belonging to the 'Sugar-Loaves' had seen him.

Where had he been, and what had he been doing with himself between half-past nine and a quarter past eleven? It was

not likely that he would return to his hay-stack, having the means of procuring himself a supper and a night's lodging. One of two things must have happened. Either the conversation in the lane had been overheard by some one, and the groom had been bribed to give Mrs. Barnard the slip; or the man had changed his mind, deeming the promised reward too small or too uncertain to compensate him for the risk he must run in trying to earn it. In any case it was clear that Tinker had gone; and it seemed more than likely that he meant to hold no further communication with Mrs. Barnard.

While this disappointment was still fresh in her mind her thoughts were suddenly turned into a new direction by a letter from the governor of the prison where her father was confined. She had contrived to see this gentleman at the time of Vargas's removal from Highclere jail to the convict settlement, and her story, told with an intense earnestness, rare in women of her class, had interested him deeply. He had promised to do all in his power to alleviate her father's position, and to bring him into a right way of thinking.

'Your father's health has been failing for some time,' he said 'and for the last three weeks he has been in the infirmary. He is not suffering from any painful or incurable disease. His malady is the wearing out of the machine, the natural result of a life of hardship and deprivation. If you would like to see him again, and I know you would, it would be well to come at once. The doctor tells me that in cases of this kind it is very difficult to calculate how long a patient may last. He may linger for weeks, or months, or may expire suddenly, going out like the flame of a candle. In this case the decay seems rapid.'

The ship by which Jane Barnard was to have sailed had already gone, all her plans having been altered by Tinker's revelation; and Mrs. Jebb was congratulating herself upon her good fortune in keeping so excellent a servant; and now Jane told her mistress that she must have three days' leave of absence, or possibly might be obliged to remain away still longer.

'Indeed, ma'am, I think you'd better suit yourself, as quick as you can,' she said. 'I can be no more good to you. I have to go to see a sick relative, and if he dies I must go to my home in America. So I don't see the use of my coming back here, except to fetch my luggage.'

Mrs. Jebb sighed, and assented.

'But I don't expect ever to have any one I shall like as well as I do you, Jane,' she said piteously.

Mrs. Barnard packed her box, and left the Homestead early on a bright June morning, so early that she had a full hour on her hands before the omnibus left Austhorpe to convey railway travellers to the station at Highclere. This surplus hour she

meant to employ in going to Tangley Manor. Mr. Blake had distinctly told her that she was to make no further appeal to him; but to a person of Jane's persevering temper this counted for nothing. She was determined that, if it were any way possible, Morton Blake should see her father before he died.

It was only eight o'clock when she presented herself at the Manor House; but Morton was an early riser, and had already made the round of his garden and stables, and was strolling on the lawn before the house. He recognised the intruder as she came along the carriage drive, and he went across the grass to speak to her

'You have come again,' he said, 'in spite of what I told you the other day.'

'Yes, sir, because something has happened which makes it my duty to trouble you. Please read that letter, sir.'

She gave him the governor's letter, and waited in silence while he read it.

'Are you going to your father?'

'Yes, sir. I am going from here to Austhorpe Lane, where I shall meet the omnibus for Higclere.'

'And you are going from Highclere to London, and from London to Portland?'

'Yes. I shall not get to Portland until late in the evening; too late to see my poor father, I'm afraid. I shall have to wait till to-morrow morning for that.'

'And what do you want me to do?'

'Oh, sir, cannot you guess what I want? I want you to see my father before he dies. I want you to hear his story from his own lips; for then, strange and unlikely as it all seems, I don't think you will refuse to believe him. Think, Mr. Blake, it is not a very great sacrifice that I ask from you. It will only cost you two days of your life, and it may put the whole story of the past in a new light.'

'You are an importunate woman,' said Morton, 'but I believe you are an honest woman.'

'Will you go to Portland, sir?'

'Yes,' answered Morton, after some moments' thought, 'I will.'

'At once. Without much delay, at any rate? You see what the doctor says.'

'I will go to town by the night mail, and will go to Portland by the first train to-morrow morning.'

Jane Barnard thanked him warmly, earnestly, and in the fewest possible words, and then she went across the sunny common, above which the skylarks were carolling joyously, to Austhorpe Lane, and waited till the queer, stunted-looking omnibus, which seemed to belong to a particular breed main-

tained for such work, came grinding along in a cloud of dust, and took her place in the musty interior, where there were only two other passengers. She had no incumbrance but her hand-bag; and thus lightly burdened she set forth on her lonely journey, gladdened by the thought of Morton's promise. He was the kind of man whom nobody would ever think of doubting. His word, once given, was an all-sufficient security.

* * * * *

At two o'clock on the following day Jane Barnard and Morton Blake were both seated in one of the well-ventilated, spotlessly-clean cells of the Infirmary at Portland, the fresh sea air blowing in through an open window near the ceiling, the sunbeams dancing on the whitewashed wall, and Humphrey Vargas lying on his narrow bed, weaker than a new-born infant, and as near the unknown darkness that girdles life round as the babe that has just been called into the light.

He was dying. The last threads in the strand were fast ravelling out. Quietly, painlessly, and in full possession of his senses to the last, the narrow span of his days was wearing swiftly to the close.

Jane sat beside his bed, with the horny, toil-furrowed hand clasped close in hers, loving him in that last hour almost as well as she had loved him thirty years ago, when she was a little girl and gambolled on his knee, and could not believe that there was a fault in daddy. Infinite pity grew into infinite love in these last hours of the sinner's life.

'Mr. Blake has come all this way to hear the truth from your own lips,' she said gently. 'You'll tell him everything, won't you, father dear? Tell him why you confessed to a crime that you hadn't done—why you told a lie to make yourself blacker than you were.'

'I'd been that drove and werrited,' said Vargas, fixing his glazing eye on Morton, with a look that had all the awfulness of death in it, mingled with a raven-like cunning, which was grotesquely suggestive of Barnaby's famous bird. 'It was constables here and magistrates there, till there wasn't one blooming corner of this blooming earth where a poor bloke could smoke his pipe in peace. Sometimes it was the casual ward, and sometimes it was the lee side of a hay-stack, and sometimes it was the jail, and the jail was a deal cleaner and comfortabler than the pauper's refuge. Wot had I got to lose, d'ye think? Nothink. What had I got to gain? Everythink. If I'd confessed only to cleaning out a dead man's pockets, society would ha' made nothink of me. He's a common kind of hevery day criminal, he is—folks 'ud a' said. Let him bide. But society's allus interested in a murderer, and the colder bloodeder he doos it the more society vallys him. I thinks as I sat under the hedge—hard by where Muster Blake lay—that blooming

October night, as it wouldn't be a bad investment for the fag end of a pauper's life. A lot o' old tabbies would come and sing psalms over me, and tell me the bigger sinner I was the more sure and sarten to go to glory if I took kindly to their tracts, and sung their hymns loud enough. And I thought as how they'd never hang me, an old un like me, for a murder done twenty year ago ; and if they didn't hang me I thought they'd make much of me as a interestin' subjick for tracts and hymns, a victim to a guilty conscience, and a shinin' example to hardened sinners.'

'Are you telling the truth?' asked Morton, who had never removed his eyes from the dying man's face during this statement.

'Why should I tell you a lie?' demanded Vargas with a ghastly grin. 'I've nothin' to gain by lies now. I've told precious many, but now I'm slidin' down into a pit that none o' you can pick me out of, I may as well indulge myself with the luxury of truth. I didn't kill Muster Blake. I never lifted a hand against him. I can look in your face, you being his son, and say that with a clear conscience ; and it ain't in many things my conscience is clear, is it, Jane, my girl? It ain't clear of being a bad father, and a bad husband, and a drunken blackguard ; but its clear of shedding a fellow-creature's blood. When I came along Austhorpe Lane that night at dusk, hard by the pollarded oak, I sees somethink lying in the ditch, and I goes down on my marrowbones to see what it is. It was a gentleman in a red coat, lying face downward in the mud, dead as a door-nail. I turned him over gently. And I laid my hand upon his heart, and I made certain sure that the life was out of him, and that there was nothing I could do to bring it back. And then, without no malice again him, I took his watch and chain, and emptied his pockets. His property was no use to him any more, poor bloke : and Lord knows I wanted it bad enough.'

'Where had you been all day?'

'Hangin' about the lanes and woods, pretty much as I told Sir Everard. Only that part about seein' Mr. Blake ride by, and goin' up to him, and taking hold of his bridle—that was all lies.'

'A man who lies once will lie twice,' said Morton. 'I don't know what to believe.'

The dying man's utter godlessness, his disregard of all the virtues, from his boyhood upwards, made his testimony of so little worth. A man who would swear anything, doubtless, to serve any purpose. Yet here, and now, with the grave so near, what object could he have to serve? What gain or comfort could he get by lying?

'Do you know and believe that you have an immortal soul?'

asked Morton earnestly, 'that after you have cast off the worn-out husk of life, you must answer in another world for the deeds you have done in this?'

'That's what the chaplain has taught me,' answered Vargas meekly. 'He's a heddicated man, and he ought to know.'

'But do you believe in a world to come?'

'Yes. I believe that this world could never be so rough on a poor varmint like me if there wasn't somethink better somewheres else to make things square for us.'

This was a self-interested way of considering the subject, but the man seemed sincere.

'And knowing that you are on the brink of the grave, do you declare that you did not kill my father?'

'I do.'

'Do you know who did?'

'No.'

CHAPTER XLI.

'THAT WOULD BE AN UNHOLY ALLIANCE.'

It was midsummer, and the lanes and woods round Austhorpe were in their flush of summer beauty, the freshness still upon the green, the glory and colour of the hedgerows at their brightest. Honeysuckles hung their sweet blossom above the ferns on every bank, and all the little homely wild flowers, dear to cottage children, dappled the grass with indescribable varieties of colour. Here spread a purple clover field; there the white blossoms of a bean field shed their delicate perfume on the warm air. Tangley Common was a blaze of golden bloom, and Tangley Wood a deep, dark land of shadow, pleasant to rest in, after the vivid world outside.

Here Dulcie came often, sometimes with Frances Grange, sometimes alone. Near though the wood was to the Manor House she had never yet encountered Morton or his sisters, or even Lizzie Hardman. She knew their habits, and that they rarely left the Manor House gardens except to ride or drive or go to church. Idle meandering in the wood had no charm for either of the sisters. Horatia was too practical and business-like, Tiny too lazy. And Morton, the ambitious, hard-working Morton, was of all men the least inclined to waste his time in dreamy ramblings under beechen boughs.

Dulcie had seen Lucy Green several times since their first meeting. She had found the poor, sickly mother sitting on her favourite bank, sometimes struggling with a little bit of needle-

work, while her children sported about among the fern, as happy and careless of the future as young fawns, or frisky little rabbits. But now that the shelter of the beech boughs had grown darker and thicker—now that the fierce midsummer sun could hardly penetrate the dense roof of foliage, poor Lucy was fain to stay at home, waiting for that last melancholy journey which should carry her to her quiet rest in Austhorpe churchyard. The end was very near. The patient was not buoyed up by those delusive hopes which cheer the last days of some consumptive sufferers. She knew that her mother and sister had both been victims to the same disease, and she was prepared to die as they had died.

Her husband had been over from Avonmore to see her more than once, and had shown himself deeply moved at the prospect of their last parting. He was not altogether heartless, and even in his selfishness clung with a feeble fondness to the wife he had once loved, who had once been bright and gay, and worthy of a husband's pride.

'We should have got on beautifully together if we had been able to keep the wolf from the door, shouldn't we, Luce?' he asked, as if in apology for his failure in the domestic character. 'But when poverty is always staring one in the face, it's deuced hard to be a model husband and father.'

'I have had my faults as a wife, Charley dear,' said the invalid meekly. 'I don't pretend to have been perfect.'

'Well, perhaps you've been over anxious, and you've nagged and worried a fellow a trifle more than was needful. But let bygones be bygones. I was always fond of you, Luce. I hope you know that?'

'I like to believe it, Charley,' sighed the wife, clasping his hand in her wasted fingers. 'You won't neglect the children when I'm gone, will you, dear?'

'Neglect them!' cried Green, as if he had always been the most devoted parent, 'why, what else shall I have to live for?'

'But when you are running about to concerts, to hear new singers———'

'My dear, that is a matter of business. I must attend to my profession.'

'Ah, Charley dear, I wouldn't mind that, if the profession would keep you and the children.'

'Well, dearest, perhaps I have been a little volatile. But I am sobering down, Luce. I have been deuced lonely and low-spirited since you left home. The place was never anything but a hole at the best; but it seemed ten times drearier when you were gone. Though you used to nag and whimper abominably, now and again, my pet—you know you did.'

'I couldn't help saying what was in my mind, Churchill.'

'Don't call me Churchill, lovey, or I shall think you are angry with me.'

'No, Charley dear, I am not angry, I am only anxious about the children. They are so young, and you are such a young man to be left with such responsibility. Miss Blake has promised to keep Mattie at the school here; she's getting on so nicely, and she's so bright, and it would be a pity for her to go back to Avonmore, where the air doesn't suit her half so well, and where she'd have to muddle away her time looking after the little ones. She's to board with the schoolmistress, and to help her a little in keeping things straight and tidy; and in a year or two she'll be a pupil-teacher, Miss Blake says; and later on Miss Blake will get her a place somewhere as a nursery governess.'

'Genteel drudgery!' said Mr. Green contemptuously.

'Well, of course, dear, she'll have to work for her living; but we must all do that in some way or other.'

Mr. Green sighed, assenting to one of the hardest truths in nature. He had an honest abhorrence of work and regimen of all kinds. He sometimes thought that he ought to have been created a butterfly, without having been obliged to endure the laborious preliminary stages of caterpillar and chrysalis.

He came and went almost as lightly as that picturesque insect.

As Mrs. Green grew worse, and the end was obviously approaching, Dulcie's visits to the cottage became more frequent. Lucy had attached herself to her mistress's daughter with an almost romantic warmth of feeling. A visit from Dulcie brightened her when her spirits were at the lowest ebb; and Dulcie, seeing the cheering effect of her presence, could not refuse to come. Here, too, on neutral ground, she sometimes met Aunt Dora, and this was an extra inducement. They could talk in Lucy's sick room as freely as if they had been alone, and Dulcie was made happy by discovering anew on each occasion that she had lost nothing of Miss Blake's affection.

One brilliant day at the end of June, a day of surpassing brightness and beauty, when the mere idea of dry-as-dust business or work of any kind seemed an insult to common sense, Dulcie went with a basket of magnificent cherries, and a few choice roses, to spend an afternoon with the invalid. She had a volume of Tennyson in her pocket, for it was one of Lucy's delights to hear poetry, and Dulcie took pleasure in reading to her.

Mattie, the eldest girl, had been withdrawn from school to assist in nursing her mother, as the little servant had her hands full in attending to the smaller children, and doing the house work. When Dulcie opened the cottage door all was silent below stairs. She peeped into the kitchen and through the open window, and saw the servant hanging out linen to dry at the bottom of the garden. And then she went lightly up the steep, narrow

stair, and was just going to open the door of the sick room when the sound of a voice within set her heart beating violently.

Morton's voice, and no other, could have so moved her.

She drew back, and was going downstairs again, when Mattie came out of the children's bedroom, which was just behind the mother's room.

'Oh, if you please, Miss, Mr. Blake is with mother. Will you come into our room, if you don't want to see him?' said Mattie, who was a precocious child, and knew all about Dulcie's broken engagement.

'I think I'd better go away,' faltered Dulcie, handing the girl her basket; 'please give your mother these flowers and cherries, with my love. I'll come another day.'

She was turning to run downstairs, but Mattie caught hold of her gown.

'Oh, pray, pray don't go, Miss,' she exclaimed, her eyes filling with tears, 'mother will be so disappointed. She loves to see you—and she says she has so few days left now———'

That argument was irresistible; Dulcie stayed.

'Mr. Blake has been with mother a good time already, and I don't suppose he'll be very much longer,' explained Mattie; 'if you don't mind coming into our room, Miss, and sitting down, he needn't see you at all.'

The one sitting-room downstairs was the only way to the front door. Through this Morton must inevitably pass when he left the house. Dulcie therefore gladly consented to wait in the children's room.

'It's quite tidy, please, Miss,' Mattie said with a deprecating air.

The room was the pink of neatness, brightened and smartened by various small efforts at artistic decoration on the part of Mattie and the servant. Coloured prints from the illustrated papers had been pasted on the whitewashed wall, a few little bits of cheap crockery adorned the mantelshelf and chest of drawers. The bed linen was as white as snow. The muslin window curtain looked as if it had been put up fresh that morning, and on the broad sill of the old-fashioned casement stood a large mug of stocks and carnations which filled the room with their perfume. Altogether Mattie's bedroom was a chamber in which the proudest lady of the land might be content to sit for a little while—perchance to meditate upon the homely graces of humble life. Dulcie turned to compliment the little girl upon the tidiness of her room, but found that Mattie had gone.

There was a door between the children's room and that of the invalid, and it had been left half open in order that the sweet summer air might circulate freely through the two rooms. In this wise every word spoken in Lucy's room was distinctly audible

to Dulcie, and the very first sentence she heard riveted her to the spot, forgetful of every consideration except the desire to hear more.

'Why did you keep these facts from me when I came to you at Avonmore?' asked Morton.

'Because he had been good and generous to me, and I felt bound to shield him. But since I have been living here—through the long wakeful nights—that is one of the worst things in my illness, you know, sir, I get so little sleep—I have brooded and brooded, till my brain felt on fire; and it has been dreadful to be obliged to keep silence about it all. I felt that I must tell the truth to some one, whatever harm it might do. At one time I thought I would tell Mr. Haldimond, for as a minister I suppose he would be bound in honour not to tell again—but then it seemed as if you had the best right to know—and so—I made up my mind to tell you everything before I was taken away.'

She paused for a little to recover her strength, while Morton sat quietly waiting, with calm, intent eyes fixed upon her face.

'Promise me one thing, sir,' said Lucy earnestly. 'Promise me that you will do nothing to bring sorrow upon Miss Courtenay!'

'How can I promise that? Do you think I would willingly bring sorrow upon her? Do you suppose it is of my own free will I am parted from her? She was dearer to me than my life. I shall always honour and love her. But that love cannot alter the fatal past. If her father killed mine——'

'He was deeply wronged. He loved his wife passionately—he was a slave to her. There is no sacrifice he would not have made for her. There never was such a husband, and she ought to have given him back love for love. I say that, although I was so fond of her. She was thoughtless, false, cruel—yes, though her natural disposition was all softness and sweetness—though she was kind and generous to every creature that came in her way, except her husband. To him she was harder than stone, and all because she was madly in love with your father.'

'Why did she not marry my father instead of Sir Everard?'

'Why, indeed! That sin lies at Lady George's door. God knows how hardly she used her daughter, and what wicked lies were told about Mr. Blake. Somehow or other Lady George contrived to make Miss Alice think that your father was in love with some one else, a young widow who had just settled in our part of the country, and who was riding to hounds and making a great dash. There's no doubt this Mrs. Mountjoy set her cap at Mr. Blake, and it was common talk that they were going to be married. Anyhow, Miss Alice believed what her mother told her. We had all gone to the South of France for Lady George's

health, and Sir Everard had come after us, and Mr. Blake hadn't —for I believe Lord George and he had had words, and he wasn't allowed to visit at the house any more. And so Miss Alice gave way all at once in a pet, and the marriage was patched up suddenly, and they were married at the Protestant Church at Cannes, and went off to Italy for the honeymoon. It was all done in a hurry. Lady George didn't give her daughter time to think what she doing. I can see the little foreign church now, and the February sunlight shining on Miss Alice's lovely head, and I know I wondered to think how soon it was all done and over, and perhaps the peace and happiness of a lifetime thrown away for ever. And so it proved to be. God help them both, poor things.'

'When did Lady Courtenay see my father again?' said Morton.

'Not till she had been married many months, and we came to Fairview, after travelling about a great deal. Her spirits were very variable while we were going from place to place. Sometimes she was full of life and gaiety, and seemed delighted with everything she saw and everybody she met; and I think at such times Sir Everard was very happy. Then all of a sudden she drooped, and fretted in a secret way which I know troubled him dreadfully. She would spend hours alone in her room, crying as if her heart would break, and she would never tell him what it was that grieved her. She would confess to nothing except to being out of spirits. Then the sorrowful mood would pass away, and she would be all brightness and life again. And so things went on till we came back to England, and she began her quiet married life at Fairview.'

'Did she seem happy then?' asked Morton.

'No, the coming home upset her terribly. I suppose it was the idea of being so near her old lover, and hearing people talk about him at every hand's turn. He and Sir Everard had been college friends, and were very much attached to each other. I don't believe Sir Everard knew at this time that Mr. Blake had been in love with Miss Alice. Lady George was such a clever manager, and things had been kept so close. Anyhow, Sir Everard invited his old friend to Fairview, and Mr. Blake used to come as often as he liked, and was always welcome. Many and many a time from the upstairs window, where I sat at my work, I have seen him and Lady Courtenay dawdling about the gardens, looking at the roses, and talking to each other, much the same as they used in the old days when she was Alice Rothney. And Sir Everard was so generous-minded and unsuspecting, and trusted his wife so thoroughly. I felt that it was all wrong—I felt as if we were all standing on the brink of a precipice—but what could I do?'

'You might have warned Lady Courtenay of her danger.'

'I did one day venture to say a few words; but she was very angry, and told me I had forgotten my place. And then in her old impulsive way she put her arms round my neck and kissed me, and said it was she that was in the wrong, and she sobbed in my arms, poor darling, and said she was a miserable woman. Believe me, Mr. Blake, I did what I could, in my poor way, to hold her back from the gulf to which she was hurrying; but Fate was stronger than her will or mine—and it was only her sad, early death that saved her from ruin.'

'Did she and my father ever meet in secret?'

'Yes, sir, that was the worst of it. They met by accident at first, and then by appointment. Heaven knows how it was I found it all out, for nobody told me, but I had got to watch her closely at that time, full of fear for what was coming, and I knew as well as possible when she used to go out for one of her lonely walks that she was going to meet Mr. Blake. Before that time she had seldom walked beyond the grounds. When she went out it was to drive or ride, but now she had taken a fancy for walking alone, two or three times a week. Sometimes she would come home with a few wild flowers in her bosom, and I knew the country well enough to be able to guess from the flowers she wore where she had been. There was a flower that I had never seen anywhere but in Tangley Wood, a particularly large dark harebell, and I saw that she often brought home a little bunch of these. She would put them in one of the vases in her dressing-room, and be as careful of them as if all the hothouse flowers in the room were worthless in comparison. Once I lost patience with her somehow, and cried out in a sudden fit of passion, "Did *he* pick them?" and she was dreadfully angry, and asked me how I dared speak to her like that.'

The sick woman stopped, sinking back upon her pillow, and smiled with a curiously bitter smile at some vivid memory of those past days.

'You see, sir, it never entered into my lady's head that I was flesh and blood like herself, and had a heart to feel and suffer, and had perhaps been foolish enough to fling it away where it wasn't wanted. Well, sir, things went on from bad to worse; and soon they were not content with meeting two or three times a week, but they must write to each other between whiles—and the letters were to be left in a hollow oak in Tangley Wood—just in the quietest, loneliest part of the wood, ever so far from any pathway or cattle track, and I must fetch and carry for them. I know it was wrong now, and I knew it then; but she coaxed and kissed me and bribed me, and seemed so miserable when I refused that I gave way, and used to carry her

letters and fetch his, and was a regular go-between. And that was how the whole story came out.'

'How did it happen?'

'I think Sir Everard's valet must have watched me, and found out that I went to Tangley Wood. He had wanted to keep company with me, and I had refused, and he had turned spiteful, so that he and me hardly spoke to each other. Perhaps he fancied I had some other sweetheart, and that I went to Tangley Wood to meet him. I believe he told his master as much as this, and that I was not a fit person to be about Lady Courtenay, for one day when I went to fetch Mr. Blake's letter Sir Everard followed me on horseback. I saw him riding along the road ever so far behind me as I crossed the common; but I didn't think he'd come my way, and I had no idea of danger. You may fancy what I felt when I turned round after getting my letter and saw him riding quietly towards me under the beech boughs, his horse's hoofs making no sound upon the mossy turf. He came upon me so sudden that I gave a little screech, and hadn't enough presence of mind to try to hide the letter.

'"What letter is that?" he asked, and I stammered out something about my lady. "You insolent hussy," he cried, "how dare you mix Lady Courtenay's name with your low intrigues?" and he bent over his horse's neck and snatched the letter out of my hand before I knew what he was doing. If I hadn't known till that moment what a proud man he was, I should have known it then by the look he gave me when I mentioned my lady's name.

'There was no address upon the letter. He tore it open and read it, sitting there under the beech boughs; and I never in my life saw anything so dreadful as the change that came over his face as he read. He took no more notice of me than if I had been a worm, but dug his heels into his horse's sides and galloped off under the low boughs. I thought he must have dashed his brains out as he rode in among the trees. I guessed by the direction he had taken that he was going back to Fairview, and I would have given ten years of my life if I could have got there before him; but of course that was impossible.'

Lucy paused once more and lay back for a little while upon her pillow, the dew of weakness on her pale forehead. Morton was too deeply moved for speech. He handed her the glass of lemonade that stood on the little table by her side, and sat quietly waiting for her to continue her narrative.

'I ran till I came to the edge of the wood, and then walked as fast as ever I could the rest of the way. I went into the house through the offices, and asked one of the men-servants if Sir Everard had come home. The man said his master and Lady Courtenay were both in the morning-room. I went to

the door, and stood outside listening, and then, hearing no sound of voices, I went in softly, and found no one in the room but my lady, and she was lying on the ground in a dead faint. I brought her to, and then she told me there had been a dreadful scene, and implored me to take a letter straight to Tangley Manor, and give it into Mr. Blake's own hands. "It is a matter of life and death, Lucy," she said. "You have stood by me so far, and you must stand by me to the end."

'How could I refuse her when she asked me, poor dear!—when she looked at me so piteously, with tears streaming down her pale cheeks? "I have not a friend in the world but you, Lucy," she said, and after that I would have gone through fire and water for her. So I told her to look sharp and write the letter, and I would take it, come what might. And take it I did, after dark, while Sir Everard was at dinner; for he was such a proud man that he went through all the mockery of a set dinner, just for the sake of throwing dust in the servants' eyes, I suppose; and he was such a curious man that he took no trouble to watch me, or my lady either. She went to her room directly she had written her letter, and locked herself in, and there I found her when I came home, after seeing your father at Tangley Manor.'

'Did you tell my father anything?'

'No, I only gave him the letter. That was all I had to do. He came out of the dining-room, where he was sitting, with his children round him, after dinner—two little girls in white frocks, and a boy. I suppose the boy was you?'

'Yes, I was the boy. God help me! How well I can remember that evening hour with my father, and how he used to make himself a boy in order to amuse and interest us.'

'Mr. Blake asked me if there was anything wrong, but I told him that he would learn everything from the letter, and then I hurried away. That was the last time I ever saw his face—the bright, manly face, with its pleasant look that I knew so well. Just as I was on the threshold of the hall door he caught my hand in his, and wrung it warmly. "God bless you, Lucy," he said. "Whatever may happen, I know you are true to us," and then he tried to sqeeze a bank-note into my hand, but I wouldn't have it. I wouldn't have taken a sixpence from him if I had been starving, though I loved him and honoured him with all my soul. But I shall never forget the touch of his hand or the sound of his voice that night. They have been a part of my life ever since.'

She was silent for a little while, as if her thoughts had fixed themselves upon the picture of the past, and her eyes had a dreamy look, as she lay gazing at the bright square of blue sky framed by the fluttering leaves which wreathed the little casement.

'My lady kept her room all the next day. She was very low, poor thing, and inclined to be hysterical. I was with her all day, for indeed she was too ill to be left. Sir Everard went out directly after breakfast, in his hunting clothes, and I wondered that he should go out hunting that day. He had not seen his wife since the previous afternoon. He did not come back to dinner, and before he came home my lady had got much worse, and we had sent for Mr. Jebb, and he had advised sending to Highclere for old Dr. Newland. "I don't like the look of things," he said; "she hasn't as much strength as a canary bird."'

'At what time did Sir Everard come home that evening?' asked Morton, almost breathless in his eagerness.

'I do not know the exact hour. I am telling you the whole truth, now, Mr. Blake, for good or evil. I am keeping nothing back. It was late—ever so long after seven. It might have been eight, or even later; but I was sitting by my poor mistress's side, and I was keeping no count of time, except to think that every minute was an hour, in my anxiety for that feeble life which was fighting with death. Sir Everard came straight to his wife's room, and took my place by the bed. He did not look at me, or speak to me. He seemed to see no one but her; and he took very little heed of anything that was said to him. He sat as still as a stone figure, till by-and-by the doctor beckoned him out of the room, and then he sat by the fire in the dressing-room, just as still and lifeless, so that I thought he was asleep, till I went in to fetch something, and then I saw his eyes fixed on the fire with an awful look in them. At eleven o'clock the baby was born, and at half-past Sir Everard was brought in to see his wife. The doctors had very little hope of her, I could see that by their faces; but the monthly nurse, a stupid old woman from Highclere, who had no merit except having been a nurse in ever so many county families, pretended to take a cheerful view of my lady's condition, and declared she would come through everything beautifully. The two doctors went downstairs to get a little refreshment, and this chattering old woman was in the dressing-room with the baby, the door between the two rooms standing ajar, while Sir Everard sat by his wife's bed, and I remained in the bed-room in attendance upon her.

'He was very tender to her, and seemed full of grief. "Darling, you are going to get better very soon," he said. "I hope not," she answered. "I hope I am going to die." "Oh, my dearest, do not say that," he said gently. "That is too cruel." "But I must say it, Everard," she answered. "My life is all wrong. I have offended against you, though I am not the vile creature you called me yesterday; and I am steeped in misery. I hope God will be merciful and take me away from this wretched world."

'"My dearest," he said, "you have your baby to live for, your dear little daughter. A new life will begin for you from to-night." He knelt beside the bed and took her hand in his and kissed it, but she snatched it away impatiently. "Your hand is as cold as ice," she cried. "I am afraid of you." Just at this moment I heard whisperings in the next room, and then the old nurse exclaimed, "Lord have mercy on us, Mr. Blake!" and then there was more whispering, and then the word "murdered" sounded distinctly above all the rest.

'My lady lifted herself up in the bed and gave a loud shriek. "Walter Blake is murdered," she cried, "and you have done it." She stretched her arm out, pointing to her husband, and then fell back upon her pillow in hysterics. "You wicked old woman," I cried to the nurse, "run down stairs for the doctor." I held my lady in my arms and tried to keep her quiet, but she threw herself about on her pillow as if she wanted to beat herself to death, and every now and then she gave a little cry like a creature that has got its death-wound, and feels life ebbing away. The cries got fainter and fainter. Sir Everard was on his knees by her side, imploring her to listen to him, to be reasonable, to be merciful. "You did it," she cried, "you are the murderer." The doctors rushed into the room just after she had said this. Old Dr. Newland took her wrist in his hand and bent down to look at her eyes; and I knew by the glance he gave Mr. Jebb that all was over. She never spoke again, but turned her poor weary head restlessly from side to side, and flung her arms about with the same dreadful restlessness till the end. Oh, Mr. Blake, it was a terrible deathbed, and it was piteous to see her husband kneeling by her side, and to hear him entreating her to be calm, to be merciful to him, promising that the rest of her days should be happy if she would but try to live for his sake, promising to be her slave, the very dirt under her feet, if she would but live for him. But prayers could not lengthen her short life. It was easy to see how her strength was ebbing with every restless movement in that dreadful death-struggle. I think she was sensible to the very last. The last look she turned upon her husband is in my mind to-day—a look full of horror.'

'He did not deny that he had killed my father?' said Morton interrogatively.

'He may have taken her words for mere raving, and have thought it useless to contradict her.'

'But surely had he been able to so he would have declared his innocence of such a crime.'

'That would have been easy to do were he ever so guilty. You have no right to think any the worse of him because he let his dying wife's words go by like the raving of fever, which

nobody ever tries to argue with. His whole mind may have been taken up by the thought that she was dying. Oh! Mr. Blake, I want to be just to him, to be merciful to him, on my deathbed. There was a time when I thought my lady spoke the truth that night, that the mystery of your father's death was made clear to her in her last agony; but to-day I want to see things calmly and reasonably. I thought it was my duty to tell you all I knew, for I misled you that day at Avonmore. I wanted to shield Sir Everard as far as I could, for he has been a good friend to me He turned me off after his wife's death, but he told me that if I was ever in poverty I was to apply to him, and he would help me, because Lady Courtenay had been fond of me. And after my marriage, when Green and I were in sore trouble for our rent, I wrote to Sir Everard, and he sent me ten pounds; and he told me he would send me the same sum quarterly as long as I wanted help; and God knows how my children and I would have lived without that forty pounds a year. So you see, sir, I am deeply beholden to Sir Everard, just as I am beholden to you for all your goodness to me; and it has only been the trouble of my mind that has made me tell you all this.'

'You have done very right to tell me. I have long been tormented by suspicions of the truth, and it is well for me to know all that can be known. One thing I will tell you for your comfort. I shall never try to bring Sir Everard Courtenay to justice, though I firmly and thoroughly believe that he is my father's murderer. For his daughter's sake he is safe from my revenge; but I will unravel the web of his mystery; I will make myself master of his secret; and only when I stand face to face with him, and charge him with his crime, shall I feel that I have done my duty as a son.'

'And you will not try to win Miss Courtenay for your wife?'

'No. That would be an unholy alliance.'

There came a faint little murmur, like a cry of pain, from the next room, but Morton took no heed of it, for just at the same moment a man's firm tread sounded on the stair, and Mr. Haldimond's cheery voice exclaimed, 'Ever so much better this heavenly day, I hope, Mrs. Green.'

CHAPTER XLII.

'IS HE STILL THE MASTER OF YOUR HEART?'

THAT faint cry of pain was the one expression of anguish wrung from Dulcie's wounded heart. She had heard all that sad story —even to those last words of Morton's.

'An unholy alliance!' Yes; it was but an echo of those still more terrible words spoken on his sick bed,—'The daughter of the murderer, the son of the murdered!' She had but too well comprehended the idea that prompted that speech—even though it seemed but the baseless utterance of delirium. The thought of it had poisoned her life. Her father was suspected of a foul murder. Morton, whom she deemed wisest among mankind, had come to this terrible conclusion. And then, reading back along the story of her life, she had seen how much there was in the circumstances of the last six months to give colour to such a suspicion. Her father's unreasonable opposition to Morton's suit in the first instance; his still more unreasonable cancelment of her engagement; his deepening gloom; the gulf between them, which seemed widening day by day. The thought of these things had weighed heavily upon Dulcie's heart ever since that day when she had sat beside Morton's bed, and had felt herself repudiated by him; and now came this painful story of the past, and the knowledge that her mother's last words had accused her father of Walter Blake's murder.

Morton rose as Arthur Haldimond entered the sick room.

'I will come and see you to-morrow, Mrs. Green,' he said, and if there is anything I can do for you in the meantime'——

'No, thank you, sir, I am well taken care of. If I was a duchess I couldn't be better off. Miss Blake and Miss Courtenay are always bringing me luxuries; and Mr. Haldimond comes to read to me sometimes, and cheers me up wonderfully. I think there must be something comfortable in the sound of your voice, sir,' she said, looking at the curate with a faint smile.

'I hope there is more comfort in what I read than in my voice, Mrs. Green, though it tickles a man's vanity to be so complimented,' answered Mr. Haldimond, in the easy tone that made him seem an old acquaintance wherever he went.

Morton had called upon the curate soon after his arrival at Austhorpe, but they had seen very little of each other since; for though Mr. Haldimond was always able to find time for lawn-tennis at Fairview he was generally too busy to accept Miss Blake's invitations to afternoon tea at Tangley Manor, a fact which Tiny took to heart, as she was passionately fond of tennis, had

succeeded in getting an exceptionally fine ground, and considered herself a crack player.

'We are not good enough for Mr. Haldimond,' she said, 'we smell of trade. I suppose he will go to no one who hasn't a long pedigree.'

Aunt Dora defended the curate warmly.

'He is as good as gold,' she said, 'and I won't hear him made light of because he doesn't choose to waste the time which he wants for good works in playing at bat and ball with a chit like you.'

'No, but he is always ready for bat and ball with a chit like Dulcie. His good works go by the board when she wants him,' retorted Tiny.

Mr. Haldimond and Morton shook hands as the latter left the room, and then the curate seated himself by the bed, and took out his book.

'As you have been chatting with Mr. Blake I shan't let you talk,' he said pleasantly, 'for I feel sure you are tired. Will you eat a little of that nice-looking jelly while I read to you?'

He handed her a plate of calves'-foot jelly, putting the spoon into her feeble hand, and watching her as she took a few morsels, with such languid appetite as showed she eat rather to please him than herself.

He was turning over the leaves of his Testament looking for a comforting chapter, when he was startled by a sound in the next room, a very audible sob.

'What is that?' he asked, putting down his book. 'Is one of the children in trouble? Not my friend Mattie, I hope.'

'The children. What was it? Yes, there is some one crying,' exclaimed the invalid, lifting herself up in the bed. 'Is one of them hurt, do you think?'

'Don't be frightened,' said Mr. Haldimond; 'it is nothing I dare say. I'll see into it.'

He went into the next room. Dulcie was on her knees by Mattie's little bed, her face buried in the coverlet, her whole frame shaken by her sobs. Arthur Haldimond had just presence of mind to call out to the invalid, 'All right, Mrs. Green, it is not one of the children,' and to shut the door between the two rooms. And then, with his heart aching as it had seldom ached in his life, he knelt beside Dulcie and laid his hand gently on her shoulder.

'Dulcie, what has happened to distress you? For God's sake tell me,' he said, with infinite tenderness.

Never before had he called her by her Christian name, but in this moment he could not for worlds have said, 'Miss Courtenay.'

'Dulcie,' he repeated, 'what is amiss with you?'

'Everything; my whole life,' she sobbed. 'Don't try to comfort me, Mr. Haldimond. I am hopelessly miserable.'

'But I will try to comfort you. I will not believe that your sorrow is incurable. There is no hopeless misery on this earth. At our worst we have the prospect of comfort and happiness in the world to come.'

'Yes, but that is such a long way off,' answered Dulcie drearily, 'and we all want to be happy here. I suppose that is only human. But my sorrow stretches to the world beyond earth. There is no comfort for me—none.'

'You will never make me believe that,' said Arthur Haldimond firmly. 'Can you not trust me freely, thoroughly, as I would trust you in any trouble of mine? Think of me first as a priest, secondly as your faithful friend. What is it that makes you unhappy? Is it the breaking of your engagement to Mr. Blake? For if it were that alone, perhaps,' he faltered just a little here, looking at her with a soul-searching gaze, 'the interference of a disinterested friend might be useful, and your father might consent to the renewal of your betrothal——'

'No, no, no,' she cried hastily, 'that can never be. Morton and I have made up our minds about that. We are both resigned to being parted. There are reasons why we can never marry.'

'Then that is not your sorrow?'

'No,' she answered with a heart-breaking sigh.

'Thank God,' ejaculated Mr. Haldimond in a low voice.

'I have been very sorry—I grieved very much at parting with Morton—but that pain was a dead, dull sorrow that I could bear, and which would have lessened, I dare say, as the years went by. No, that is not my trouble. That grief is bearable.'

'You mistify, you torture me,' said Mr. Haldimond. 'I would give half my life—all my life to comfort you. For God's sake trust me. I am a man of the world; I know how to face the difficulties and perplexities of life. It must go hard with me if I cannot help you. Only confide in me.'

'That is impossible,' she answered gravely, and in a tone so resolute even in its gentleness that Arthur Haldimond knew her decision was irrevocable.

'Why can you not tell me the nature of your sorrow?'

'Because it is somebody else's sorrow as well as mine. I can pour out my grief to no one but God. Pray forget all about it—put it out of your mind. You can do no good in any way. You may do great harm if you talk about my trouble.'

'Talk about it! Dulcie, what do you take me for?' he asked reproachfully.

'I beg your pardon. I forgot that with you all secrets are

safe. It is a part of your office to be trusted in the hour of trouble.'

She had risen from her knees and dried her tears, and was standing quietly by the window, pale and grave, and with a womanly dignity in her face and manner that claimed his respect as much as her grief claimed his pity. He went across to her and took her hand, and stood beside her looking down at the fair girlish face, made womanly by a great sorrow.

'Dulcie, my heart always yearns to a creature in trouble,' he said, 'if it were only one of the dumb things in the fields—but to see you sorrowful, to see you bowed down by a grief that I must not know and cannot comfort—that is too bitter. Dulcie, my delight, my love; do you not understand that your griefs are more to me than all other sorrow in the world—that you are dearer to me than anything upon this earth? From the happy Sabbath when I first saw your sweet, sad face, with its pathetic pain, I have been learning to love you. I think I loved you at the first—that my heart leapt into life at the sight of your face, kindling with a fire it had never felt before. Dulcie, tell me, is it hopeless for me—have you any remnant of love left for me? Were it but the least and faintest spark of that holy fire, I would be content, knowing that I could cherish and warm it into a flame.'

She stood before him with downcast eyes, letting him tell his story. A delicate bloom crept into her pallid cheeks as she listened—a faint smile curved the faintly-tinted lips. At last she lifted her eyelids and looked at him with sad, serious eyes.

'You have been very good to me,' she murmured. 'Pray believe that I am grateful, and that I honour and esteem you. I am proud to think that you care for me, and I shall carry the memory of your words to my grave. Yes, I shall always remember you as one of the best and truest friends Heaven has given me. But you must never again talk to me of love. You must think of me as if I were a Roman Catholic and had taken the veil. I shall never marry. The same reason that forbids my marriage with Morton would prevent my marrying any one else.'

'And if there had not been this obstacle—if you were free to engage yourself——'

'Even then I could have no heart to give,' she answered. 'Think what a little while ago I was engaged to Morton.'

'But is he still as dear to you as when that engagement was broken?' asked Mr. Haldimond. 'Is he still the master of your heart?'

A vivid blush dyed Dulcie's cheeks and brow. She turned her head hastily away. The hand which Arthur Haldimond was holding trembled in his. She drew it from his gentle clasp.

'You have no right to ask such questions,' she said, drawing herself up a little. 'I have told you the truth. I shall never marry. I shall take care of my dear—father—and be his faithful companion as long as he lives—and then—if—I lose him—I suppose God will take care of me.'

All her calmness deserted her in a moment, and tears streamed from her eyes.

'Good-bye,' she said, hurrying to the door. 'Don't follow me please. Don't—I am better by myself.'

Arthur Haldimond reluctantly obeyed her.

'I see light,' he said to himself. 'Whatever her sorrow is, it is her father's trouble rather than hers. It shall be my task to fathom the mystery, and to cure the evil.'

He left the cottage half an hour later, proud and hopeful; for that sudden glow of colour in Dulcie's face, the fair head turned shyly from him, had told him that her heart secretly acknowledged a new master; that Morton was no longer without a rival in her love.

CHAPTER XLIII.

MORTON'S BRILLIANT IDEA.

Morton Blake went home that afternoon confirmed in his belief in Sir Everard's guilt. That belief had taken root in his mind in spite of himself, and had slowly grown upon him as time went by. Shafto Jebb's story of the hoof-prints of a second horse on the spot where the murder was committed fitted curiously with the story of the finding of the spur; and the groom's disappearance gave weight to his evidence, for it indicated that he had been tampered with by some one in Sir Everard's interest. And now Lucy Green's deathbed confession made the whole mystery clear—set before Morton's eyes, as in a picture, the tragedy of his father's death. The husband, loving deeply, deeply wronged, and avenging himself horribly upon his treacherous friend.

Dearly as Morton loved his father, and bitterly as he deplored his untimely fate, he could not, as a man, withhold his pity from the murderer. Had the two men met formally face to face, as they might have done fifty years ago, and the lover had died by the hand of the betrayed husband, the world could hardly have condemned the successful duellist. It was just possible that Walter Blake had not fallen without a struggle for life; that he had wrestled with his assailant before he received his death-stroke. It was hardly consistent with Sir Everard's character

and education to have played the stealthy assassin. But that his hands had been dyed in Walter Blake's blood, that the man who had just died in Portland prison had played a fool's part, and accused himself of a crime he had not committed, Morton was thoroughly convinced. He remembered Sir Everard's reluctance to accept the vagabond's confession ; his willingness to let the man escape ; how he had been incredulous from the first. He remembered his ghastly face in the witness box, when his dead wife's name had been imported into the inquiry.

Now, he told himself, he knew that Sir Everard was the murderer. It was no longer a matter of suspicion—a darkly-brooding fear. It was conviction, and more than conviction. It was knowledge.

What was he to do?

Humphrey Vargas was dead. Justice to him demanded no sacrifice from the living. He had passed altogether out of the question. And, anxious as Mrs. Barnard was to clear her children from the reproach involved in her father's supposed guilt, it would have been hard to sacrifice Dulcie's tenderest feelings to a morbid sensitiveness on the part of a vagabond's daughter.

'Mrs. Barnard's children must take their chance,' thought Morton. 'Their grandfather inflicted this disgrace upon his name of his own free will—being a thief and a vagabond already—and it is no duty of mine to wipe the stain from his grand-children's pedigree.'

Two considerations were now paramount in his mind ; first, the thought that his father's dishonour must be kept from the gossip of the newspapers and the tittle-tattle of clubs and coteries. It would be a poor thing to avenge his father's death by bringing Sir Everard to the dock, if in so doing he must reveal the one dark spot in his father's life—the one dishonour in an honourable career—to the malignant scrutiny of a world that loves to hear of sin in high places. Secondly, for Dulcie's sake, for the love of her who must ever seem to him purest and sweetest among women, he would do much to shield Sir Everard from the law, even while he longed to pour upon him the vials of an orphaned son's wrath.

He walked in Tangley Wood till the summer light was deepening into shadow, brooding upon what he had heard, meditating upon the duty that lay before him, and thinking how he could best make that duty fit in with the other claims upon his time and thought.

His ambition—that ardent desire to be of some use in his generation, to leave the world in some wise better than he found it, which is the loftiest kind of ambition—had been reawakened by Lizzie Hardman's influence. Life, which for a while had

seemed a burden to him, had again become full of work and hope. His days were no longer empty, albeit the rosy light of first love shone upon them no more. He had taught himself to believe that there were other joys for which a man might live—the delight of success in good work, the rapture of improving the lives of other people.

The election at Blackford was to take place at the end of the session, and it was already known in the big, bustling town that Morton Blake was going to stand. His speeches at Highclere, and the pamphlet on compulsory education which he had lately published, had won him friends among the most enlightened section of the working classes. He was not a man to please extreme Radicals. He had the warmest sympathy with the operatives' claims and wrongs; but he saw in trade unionism disadvantages and perils in the future which outweighed the benefits to be derived from it in the present. He had, therefore, openly declared himself adverse to the system, and had in so doing hazarded his popularity among a constituency chiefly consisting of working men. But he had the courage of his opinions, and was prepared to defend them in the teeth of dead cats and rotten eggs, or any symbolism by which the sons of toil might choose to express their opinions.

Lizzie had told him that he was sure of success at Blackford, that he would there be appreciated and understood; and of late he had fallen, quite unconsciously, into the habit of thinking Miss Hardman the most enlightened person among his acquaintances.

'She has such a well-balanced mind, such a calm, dispassionate way of looking at things, that I don't think she would be led astray by her own regard for me,' he told himself. 'And if it were only out of gratitude for all her goodness to me, I ought to pay her the poor compliment of taking her advice.'

He had thought a good deal about Lizzie lately, giving her all the thought he had to spare after the one absorbing idea of Sir Everard's guilt, and the secondary consideration of his own parliamentary prospects. He was deeply impressed with a sense of obligation to Lizzie for her devotion to him during his illness, and his slow return to health. He wanted to testify his gratitude in some permanent and substantial manner; and upon this very evening he found an opportunity of taking his aunt Dora into his confidence, and asking her advice in the matter.

They were loitering about the garden together, looking at the standard roses, in the cultivation whereof Miss Blake took special pride, while the two girls played lawn-tennis with Lord Beville and Lady Frances, who had dropped in after dinner. Frances and Morton seemed to have grown less intimate since his illness. He knew that she had become Dulcie's bosom

friend, and he shrank with a morbid sensitiveness from any conversation which might lead to the mention of Dulcie's name. Frances saw that he in some measure avoided her. She was pained and wounded by his coolness, but she was too generous to be angry.

'There was a time when a cold look from him hurt me like a sharp sword,' she said to herself. 'But that time is past and gone. Morton is no longer all the world to me. Indeed I almost wonder that I could ever have cared about such a commonplace young man.'

'Auntie,' said Morton, with sudden seriousness, as they stood before a superb Marshal Neil, 'has Lizzie any money of her own?'

'Why, Morton, what a question! She has plenty of money: but if you mean by inheritance, not a penny. Her people were quite poor. Her grandfather and yours were fellow-workmen together in the same foundry; but while your grandfather climbed to the top of the ladder, hers remained at the bottom. They were staunch friends to the last; and when I heard that Matthew Hardman's eldest son had been left a widower with six children, I felt I should be showing respect to my dear father's memory by taking the smallest of them off his hands altogether, and adopting her as my own. Poor Matthew died soon after, and Lizzie's nearest relation is his brother, who was very good and helpful in planting out the three surviving children. Of course I shall leave Lizzie well provided for. She must know that, though I have never told her so in plain words.'

'Of course, dearest auntie. But in the meantime Lizzie has no money that is absolutely her own.'

'I don't know what you mean by absolutely her own. I give her an allowance for her gowns and pocket-money. It is paid quarterly, and is as much her own as money can be. She spends very little of it upon herself, dear child, for it is her delight to help others.'

'And every time she receives this allowance she must feel a sense of obligation. It is a gift, however freely given—not an income arising from capital in her own possession.'

'Good gracious, Morton, what a commercial mind you must have! What difference can it make to her?'

'A good deal, I imagine, to a girl of sensitive nature.'

'Lizzie loves me too well, and is too sure of my love, to feel any obligation in the matter.'

'My dear aunt, the sense of obligation is just the one feeling that cannot be eradicated from the human mind. In some natures it cometh up as the flower we call gratitude, in others it is a weed that strangles affection. Now, I am at this moment labouring under the sense of obligation to Lizzie, and I want to

prove to her that I am grateful. You know how more than good she was to me during my illness.'

'Can I ever forget it?'

'Now, I want to reward her kindness—I can never extinguish the obligation—in a really substantial manner: and I have been thinking that I could hardly do better than invest, say four thousand pounds, in her own name, in North-Western stock, and quietly hand her the certificates in an envelope, with my love. That would give her about one hundred and sixty pounds a year; and she need no longer be dependent upon you for her gowns and bonnets.'

'Morton,' cried Miss Blake, turning indignantly upon her nephew, 'I am astonished at you!'

'My dearest auntie.'

'I am surprised at your want of proper feeling. What, do you think that such devotion, such tenderness, as Lizzie's are to be bought and paid for?'

'Of course not. But I think such goodness ought to be recompensed in some substantial manner.'

'That is only another way of saying that it ought to be paid for. I did not think you could be so unkind.'

'That is rather rough upon a fellow, auntie, when he is trying to be kind.'

'It only shows me how little you understand Lizzie's nature. I am very glad you mooted the question to me, rather than to her. Had you made such a proposition to Lizzie herself you would have broken her heart.'

'Is she so sensitive?'

'She is very sensitive—where you are concerned.'

The phrase struck Morton as curious, but he attached no direct signification to it. He thought his aunt was just a little foolish in her readiness to take offence for her *protégée*.

'Well, my dear auntie,' he said after a pause, 'I suppose you are right. No doubt women understand each other's feelings much better than we rougher creatures can comprehend the gentler sex. I could very well afford to part with four thousand pounds; and I fancied it would be nice for Lizzie to have a little income of her own to fritter away upon small charities and presents to her needy brother and sisters at Blackford—but since you say it must not be, I must content myself with offering her some substantial present—a diamond bracelet—or a pony carriage—or something of that kind. What do you say to a pony carriage, with the most perfect thing in cobs to draw it—and then Lizzie could never be snubbed by my sisters when she wanted a drive?'

'I think she would be absolutely enchanted. She is very fond of driving, and adores horses. To have a cob of her own

would be delightful to her. Tiny and Horatia have been always rather grudging in allowing her the use of the ponies.'

'I'll see Jebb this afternoon and get him to look out for a cob. We must have something perfect. And Dulliner, of Avonmore, shall build the carriage—as light and dainty a thing as Queen Mab's car. I would much rather have given her the railway stock—but if the pony-trap will please her, I am content.'

'This time you really have hit upon a brilliant idea, Morton,' said his aunt, smiling at him. 'Not that there is the least need to make her a present of any kind. Such goodness as hers is always its own reward.'

'I suppose that is why the recipients take so little trouble to show their gratitude,' answered Morton, laughing.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A PARAGON OF COBS.

Morton saw Mr. Jebb early next day, and told him his desire to possess a perfect specimen of the genus cob.

'Have you any fancy about colour?' asked the surgeon, who knew the pedigree and merits of almost every horse within twenty miles of Austhorpe.

'I am not particular as to that; but I should like a gray.'

'Grays are more subject to heart disease than any other kind of horse,' said Mr. Jebb, with a surgical air.

'I think I would risk that, if I saw a perfect gray.'

'I fancy I know where to put my hand upon the very thing you want; but the man who owns him will ask a stiffish price.'

'I am willing to give a good price if I can get value for my money.'

Mr. Jebb then proceeded to relate the biography of the animal in question. How he had been bred by a gentleman farmer, whose place was three miles on the other side of Highclere; how from his earliest colthood upwards he had been a thing of beauty and a joy to all the neighbourhood; how his legs were stronger than crowbars, and his hind-quarters a marvel of muscular development. Mr. Jebb gave the technical name to every joint, as he ran over the cob's perfections.

'But you'll have to give a long price for him,' he concluded, shaking his head solemnly. 'However, you won't mind that. Fifty pounds more or less won't matter to you.'

'Is he good-tempered?' asked Morton. 'Could a lady drive him?'

'A baby could—an infant of two years old. He'd have

nothing to do but sit behind him and hold the reins. Gentle as a sheep—manners perfect.'

'Why does his owner want to sell him?' asked Morton, rather suspiciously.

'Simply because he bred him to sell. The man is not exactly a dealer, but he has some fine grass land, and he makes money by horses when he can. He has kept this cob longer than he intended, because he's too good for the neighbourhood. Nobody about here will give the price. Mrs. Aspinall wanted him, but Mrs. Aspinall wanted to skin my friend Tilberry, and Tilberry wasn't to be had. "I'd rather the cob eat his head off three times over," he said to me, "than I'd be jewed out of him."'

'I should like to see the cob,' said Morton.

'Of course you would. I'll drive you over to Tilberry's this afternoon, if you'll go.'

'I think I'd better drive you over,' said Morton, aware that Mr. Jebb's horses were generally screws, the gentleman knowing what was good, but not being able to afford himself the luxury of possession. 'I'll drive you in my dog-cart, and you must come back to Tangley to dine, if you have nothing better to do with yourself. But not a word about the cob before my womenkind. I want the business kept quiet for the present.'

'Precisely,' replied Jebb. 'I never talk about business before ladies. The wheels of domestic life go so much smoother when the dear creatures are kept in a state of happy ignorance.'

The two gentlemen were at Alderwood Farm by five o'clock, and Mr. Tilberry, being forewarned by a telegram from his friend the surgeon, was at home to receive them. He had the smart, knowing air peculiar to men who make money out of horseflesh; but he seemed honest withal, and the cob was obviously an honest horse.

He was undoubtedly handsome—'handsome as paint,' Mr. Jebb called him; and he went through his paces without committing the smallest indiscretion.

He had a kind eye, and lovingly reciprocated every attention that was shown him.

'I only wish I could afford to keep him for myself,' said Mr. Tilberry, gazing admiringly at the animal; 'but I can't. He's too good for me.'

The cob's appearance being in every way satisfactory, his purchase was only a question of figures, and Morton Blake was inclined to be liberal. He offered Mr. Tilberry a cheque for only twenty pounds less than he asked; whereas that gentleman had provided himself with a wide margin for bargaining, and could very well have afforded to abate forty. The purchase was agreed on the spot; provided always that the veterinary examination should prove satisfactory.

'I'm not afraid of that,' said Mr. Tilberry, with conscious rectitude.

'What do you call him?' asked Morton.

'Tommy,' answered the farmer. 'I'm not fanciful about naming my stock. If I breed a horse I call him Tommy, and all my mares are Polly—Bay Polly or Brown Polly, Gray Tommy or Roan Tommy, as the case may be. It saves a world of trouble.'

The cob was to be examined by the Highclere veterinary surgeon that evening, and sent over to Tangley next morning. Morton had telegraphed to Mr. Dulliner to put the carriage in hand immediately, trusting to the coachbuilder's own taste to turn out a perfect article, so the whole business was in a fair way to completion.

It seemed strange that so small a matter as this should have served to divert Morton's mind from that gloomy brooding upon one painful theme which had darkened his life for the last six months. Yet so it was. His thoughts were full of Lizzie and her delight at receiving a gift so unexpected and so acceptable as the cob and carriage must needs be. He had seen her trudge forth cheerily on many a sultry summer morning, to walk four or five miles along a dusty road, on some errand of charity; while his sisters drove off to Highclere to make some frivolous purchase in millinery or fancy work, which they chose to consider indispensable to their existence.

'So sorry I can't drive you to your poor woman, Lizzie,' Tiny would say, with that beaming good-nature which is the happy gift of some selfish people. 'Another time I might be going that way; but I know you adore walking.'

And now Lizzie would have her own carriage, and would be independent of these fine ladies.

He was quite impatient for the arrival of the cob next morning, and could hardly eat his breakfast, so full were his thoughts of Lizzie and the pleasure in store for her. He was not going to wait for the carriage, but had made up his mind to present the cob immediately. Lizzie was devotedly fond of animals, and would cherish and idolize him, without doubt.

'I dare say auntie is right,' he said to himself, glancing at Lizzie, who was pouring out tea at the other end of the table, fresh and bright-looking in her neat blue-and-white print gown, a garment which gave the laundry-maids little trouble, and contrasted curiously with the cambric frills, pleatings, puffings, and embroidery of the breakfast gowns affected by Tiny and Horatia.

'That's one very nice point in Lizzie's character,' said Tiny complacently, on one occasion, 'She knows her place, and never tries to imitate *us*.'

The blue-and-white striped gown, neatly fitting the neat figure, just short enough to show the neat little foot in its blue stocking and Cromwell shoe, the useful scissors and pin-cushion hanging from the black waistband, the black silk apron, and plain linen collar gave Lizzie the look of a Parisian grisette; in the days when De Musset, grisettes, and the Quartier Latin were in their glory. Morton looked at her with frank, brotherly admiration. What a bright face it was to see at a breakfast-table!—dark eyes full of mind and expression — dark hair neatly brushed back from the wide, full brow, and a complexion rosy with the healthful bloom that comes from an active life spent chiefly in the open air.

Andrew came in just as breakfast was finished, and made a confidential announcement in his master's ear.

'Girls,' cried Morton, rising hastily, 'I have bought a cob, and I want you to come and look at him.'

Tiny and Horatia were on their feet instantly, but Lizzie went on quietly with her knitting, which she carried about with her and proceeded with at all odd moments, like Mrs. Poyser.

'Is he for saddle?' asked Tiny, with an idea that he might carry her to hounds next winter.

'No, for harness. Come, Lizzie, you must see him too. I want your opinion most especially.'

'Since when has Lizzie become a great authority upon horse-flesh?' asked Horatia, with a sneer.

She was very fond of Miss Hardman, as she told everybody, in her place, but that place was a lowly one, and Horatia's jealousy was up in arms at the idea of Lizzie's opinion being deferred to by the master of the house.

'People who are very fond of horses are generally pretty good judges of them,' answered Morton carelessly. 'I am particularly anxious to know what Lizzie thinks of this one.'

'I can't imagine what you want with another horse,' exclaimed Horatia captiously. 'Your hunters are kept to be looked at, and you work your dog-cart horse so little that he is generally as wild as a hawk.'

'Never mind that, Horry. This new animal is a particular fancy of mine, and I don't think you will any of you find fault with him.'

They were on their way to the stable yard while this conversation was going on, and had by this time arrived on the scene where Gray Tommy was to show his paces. The stable yard was by no means a bad place upon a warm summer morning—the windows of stables and coachmen's rooms and saddle room all bright with flowers—stocks, fuchsias, geraniums, mignonette—the yard as clean as a spinster's best parlour, the grooms lounging at open doors in their cool morning attire, the dogs

straining at their chains, the horses rattling their head-stalls in the dusky interior of the stables, and the morning sun-light agreeably tempered by the shadow of old limes and maples, which stretched their big branches across the wall that divided the stables from the shrubbery.

A smart-looking groom had led over the cob, and now with an air of pride pulled off his clothing and exhibited him to his new owner.

Tommy was in that lustrous and preternaturally sleek condition to which an accomplished dealer, and nobody else, is able to bring a horse. He arched his handsome neck, and bent his beautiful head shyly, and then looked round with a startled air, as knowing that he was amongst strangers.

Lizzie Hardman went straight up to him and patted his nose, and made much of him. She would have done the same for any old waggon-horse on the farm, having an intense love of the equine race generally, without reference to breed or beauty.

'Well, Lizzie, how do you like him?' asked Morton, smiling at her as she stood with her wavy brown hair resting on the cob's plump neck, and her hand caressing his velvet muzzle.

Horse and girl made a pretty picture in the morning light; and Morton thought how nice it would be to have them photographed just at this moment.

'I'm not the least bit of a judge, as you all know,' answered Lizzie, without taking her eyes off the cob, 'but I think him absolutely beautiful—a paragon of cobs.'

'Then suppose we call him Paragon, instead of Tommy,' said Morton; and then going close up to her, he added, 'I am very glad you like him, Lizzie, for I want you to be his mistress. You are a very active young lady, always going here, there, and everywhere on some good office. I want you to accept the cob, and a carriage I am having built for him, as a small souvenir of all your goodness to me while I was ill. Nothing I can do, nothing I can say, could ever be enough to prove my gratitude; but the cob may just serve to remind you that I have been grateful.'

The girl looked at him in sheer amazement, as if she could hardly believe her ears, then tears rushed to her eyes: she tried to speak, and could not, and then she turned on her heel and ran across the yard and into the house as fast as her feet could carry her.

'What in the name of all that's reasonable is the matter with Lizzie?' ejaculated Horatia, who had not been near enough to hear what Morton said. 'Has she gone suddenly mad? If this is the effect of her love of horses she had better keep out of the stables.'

'It's nothing,' answered Morton, laughing in a somewhat

embarrassed manner. 'The dear girl is needlessly sensitive to the smallest kindness. The cob is a present for her, and she is quite overcome at the idea of possessing him.'

Tiny came a step forward from the spot where she had been standing gracefully posed at Aunt Dora's side, and contemplated her brother with her eyes opened to their widest extent.

'This time it is you who are going mad,' she exclaimed. 'That cob,' pointing at the animal with extended finger, "that—cob—a—present—for—Lizzie Hardman! You must be dreaming!'

'I never felt myself wider awake.'

'What in mercy's name will she do with him?'

'Well, I don't suppose she'll put him in her pocket, or wish to keep him in the drawing-room,' retorted Morton lightly. 'I should imagine she'll sit in the carriage I have ordered for her and drive him: and as she goes about a good deal, chiefly to do good to other people, and as she can rarely get the loan of your carriage, I imagine she will find him uncommonly useful.'

Tiny gave a long sigh, and looked at Horatia. Horatia echoed the sigh, and returned the look, with interest.

'Auntie,' said Tiny, with charming insolence, 'I had no idea there was madness in the family. You ought to have told us; for then we might have been prepared for this outbreak of cobs and chaises.'

You seem to forget what reason I have to be grateful to Lizzie, and how very small an expression of my gratitude this little offering is.'

'Oh, a mere trifle, like a pair of gloves or a pocket handkerchief,' exclaimed Tiny, with an angry toss of her head. 'All I can say is, you never gave me a horse, and that you were extremely disagreeable when I asked you to let me ride Butterfly to hounds.'

'I think you are both disagreeable and ill-bred, Tiny,' said Dora Blake. 'I could not have believed that you could be capable of such an exhibition of bad feeling.'

'Oh, of course, auntie, I always knew that Lizzie was your favourite: but I thought Horatia and I stood first in Morton's estimation.'

'You are utterly unreasonable and provoking, Tiny,' said Morton, walking away, 'and I am not in the mood to argue you out of your folly.'

The grooms had happily retired into the background with the cob while this discussion was in progress. Tiny and Horatia went into the shrubbery, their cheeks crimson, to talk over Morton's absurd conduct. Miss Blake went straight to Lizzie's room.

She found the girl crying as if her heart were broken and almost hysterical.

'My dear Lizzie, this is too foolish.'

'I know it is, auntie dear,' answered Lizzie, strangling a final sob with a great effort. 'How Morton—how you all must despise me! But, indeed, I could not help it. The surprise—the idea that he had thought so much of my paltry services—his delicate consideration in choosing the very present which I should most delight in—quite overcame me. I could not for the life of me have helped making a fool of myself. And now I will sit down quietly and write Morton a few lines thanking him, as well as I can, for his dear gift. Oh the lovely creature! and to be my very own! It is too much.'

'My poor child, do you think you are of less value in this house than the rest of us, and that your pleasure ought not to be considered?'

'Dear auntie, I know that I am here through your charity. You have done everything in the world to make me forget that fact, but the fact remains all the same. What right have I to horses and carriages, and to all the luxuries I enjoy? None whatever. I owe everything to your bounty.'

'I won't hear such a word, Lizzie. You are my niece—my daughter—by adoption. I took your life into my keeping when you were almost a baby, and I took upon myself the duty of making you happy.'

'And I have been completely happy with you, dearest. I am always wondering why Providence has been so good to me.'

'And you are always proving your gratitude to Providence by your goodness to other people, Lizzie. Don't write to Morton, dear; that would be ever so much too formal. Just go down to his study and tell him quietly that you are pleased with his gift.'

'I will,' said Lizzie, looking as if it were a tremendous ordeal.

'Why, surely you are not afraid of him?'

'Afraid of him? No, but I am afraid of my own feelings.'

The words were most innocently spoken, yet they set Dora Blake wondering.

'God forbid that this attention of Morton's should prove cruel kindness!' she thought. 'But my Lizzie is too strong-minded for any idle sentiment. She would never care for a man who did not care for her.'

Lizzie ran down to the hall, opened the study door and looked in. Morton was not at his desk, in his usual absorbed attitude, with books and papers about him. He was standing by the open window looking idly out at the garden, where the butterflies were skimming across the roses, and the bees humming drowsily in the big white lilies.

Morton, I have come to thank you for your gift. I was so

surprised just now, that I could find no words to express my gratitude.'

'My dear Lizzie, gratitude is all on my side. I am deeply obliged by your goodness to me; and the cob is the most trifling expression of my regard. Had I followed my own inclination I should have offered you something better worth having; but I thought, perhaps, you might imagine I wanted to extinguish the obligation; and, believe me, I do not. I am willing to be your debtor to the end of my life.'

'There is no debt,' faltered Lizzie, pale and grave, and with a troubled air which Morton could not help seeing. 'Can you suppose that I was not glad to be of some small use in this house, where my life has been made so pleasant? I shall love the cob—Paragon, I think you said he was to be called—with all my heart.'

'Love him and make him work for you. Remember you are to be his sole mistress. He shall have the loose box at the end of the yard, and Thomas, who is a kind of *protégé* of my aunt's, I believe, shall be your own particular groom.'

Lizzie murmured a few more words of thankfulness, and then gladly made her escape, touched beyond measure by Morton's kindness, and in no wise foreseeing the pain it was to bring upon her.

But it was not long before the evil effects of Morton's gush of gratitude became painfully obvious to the innocent Paragon's mistress. Clementine and Horatia resented Lizzie's possession of the cob as if it had been an act of arrogance and self-assertion upon her own part. They kept some slight curb upon their tongues before Aunt Dora; they were careful not to push their insolence too far in the hearing of their brother. But when they had poor Lizzie all to themselves they gave full vent to their jealous displeasure, in hints and innuendoes which were a great deal worse to bear than the plainest speech. Lizzie possessed more than the common share of self-command. She had schooled herself in years gone by to endure a good deal of quiet insolence from the sisters, who in the white frock and blue sash period of their existence had taken pains to assert their superiority to their aunt's dependent, all in the most amiable and affectionate manner, loving their dear Lizzie fondly—in her 'place.' As they grew up selfishness and self-assertion had become the habit of their minds, encouraged by their aunt's unselfishness and Lizzie's willingness to take the lowest place. It had seemed to them the most natural thing in the world, a part of the original scheme of creation, as it were, that they should enjoy all the luxuries of life, and that Lizzie should do without them. They even went so far as to declare that they envied her her simpler tastes and her more active habits, her love of long walks and indifference to evening parties.

'I really think you could go through life wearing cotton gloves, and hardly mind,' said Tiny, with contemptuous wonder.

'I really believe I could,' answered Lizzie, who had made away with a quarter's allowance in buying a widow's only son his discharge from the Hussar regiment in which he had foolishly enlisted.

'Well, dear, you may wear them as long as you please, provided you don't put them on when you are coming out with me,' replied Tiny playfully. 'The very sight of a cotton glove sets my teeth on edge.'

The new carriage from Avonmore arrived at Tangley about a week after the advent of the cob. It was a park phaeton, a marvel of neatness combined with elegance; the colouring subdued and sober, the outline perfect grace.

'Well, my dear Morton,' said Horatia, with a sigh, when the Avonmore carriage had been surveyed by the assembled family, 'if you suppose that after seeing this I am ever again going to drive that rattletrap of a chaise you were good enough to bestow upon your sisters six years ago, **you** are vastly mistaken.'

'I have not the least objection to your giving Mr. Dulliner an order for a carriage to-morrow, my dear Horatia. There is plenty of room on the premises, and you can afford to gratify any whim of that kind.'

A disinclination to spend her own money, when she could possibly have her desires gratified at anybody else's expense, was a marked characteristic of Horatia's practical mind. Indeed, it was perhaps in this line that her business capacity showed itself. The sisters each possessed a handsome sum in the funds; but while Tiny's selfishness took the form of a lavish expenditure on her own whims and fancies, and generally landed her in insolvency before the half-year was out, Horatia's regard for her own interest was demonstrated by her strict prudence, and had enabled her already to make various small investments on her own account.

So Morton's sisters went on driving their chestnut ponies, and the carriage which had been elegant enough in its day, but which had a shabby air when contrasted with Mr. Dulliner's masterpiece; and envy rankled in their breasts, and black care held on behind as they drove. Paragon proved worthy of his name. He was as sensible as a Christian, said the grooms; and they might have gone so far as to say that he was more sensible than many Christians; for he had a placid nature, did his work cheerfully, and trotted along the country lanes at an honest, equal pace, like a cob who was glad to earn his salt.

The better Paragon behaved the more angry Horatia and Clementine felt about him. If he had turned out a screw—if

he had been a confirmed jibber, and had backed the pony carriage into a ditch—if Lizzie had been utterly unable to drive him, they might have become reconciled to the cob's existence, and might have looked upon the whole business as a subject for good-humoured ridicule. But, as it was, the angry fire in each girlish breast, suppressed and smouldering, grew every day fiercer and more ready to burst into flame.

At length came the conflagration. Miss Blake had driven over to Highclere to lunch with Lady Ritherdon, and Lizzie was alone with the two girls. The afternoon had turned out wet, whereby Clementine, who had prepared an elaborate costume for a lawn party, and was denied the delight of exhibiting herself in it, was in a fretful and dissatisfied mood, thinking that the world in a general way had gone wrong.

The rain was a steady downpour, offering no hope of cessation or diminution—a cold, uncomfortable rain, which made all the world look one dull gray.

'I never felt so shivery in my life,' said Tiny, with a wistful glance at an arrangement in ferns and peacocks' feathers which occupied the place of the winter logs. 'Why can't we have a fire? Why must we sit shivering just because it happens to be July?'

'I don't think the housemaids would like it,' faltered Lizzie, who had learnt from Aunt Dora to be very considerate of the servants.

'I will not have my ferns and feathers disturbed for any one,' said Horatia, who always claimed possession of any article which her hands had helped to arrange, or her mind to plan. 'I laboured for a whole day in getting up a nice effect, and I won't have the fireplace touched.'

'You laboured, indeed!' cried Tiny. 'You mean you looked on while other people worked, and then claimed the merit of the whole transaction.'

'The peacocks' feathers were my own particular idea,' protested Horatia.

'Of course. Nobody but a strong-minded creature like you would ever have brought such unlucky things into the house. I haven't had a moment's peace since you did it. My last new gown but one an utter failure—my crewel work at a standstill, because no fancy shop in the universe can match my wool—and—in short, everything at sixes and sevens.'

'Why not have a fire in the workroom, Tiny?' suggested Lizzie good-naturedly. 'We might all go up there for afternoon tea. It would be ever so snug and comfortable.'

The workroom was an upstairs den which had once been the schoolroom—a good-sized, airy room enough, but the repository for all the shabbiest furniture in the house. Here Lizzie worked

for her Dorcas society, sometimes made a gown for herself, and often assisted the maid in altering a ball dress for the frivolous Tiny, or in making a cheap costume for the economical Horatia. It was a very comfortable room, but it was very shabby ; and it had of late years been in some manner Lizzie's own particular domain.

'Thank you for the brilliant suggestion,' said Tiny. 'No, your room is very nice, no doubt, but I like rather more elegant surroundings, and as long as I am allowed to occupy the drawing-room I shall do so, even if Horatia's selfishness and your consideration for the housemaids deny me the comfort of a fire. I don't suppose we shall long enjoy the right to call any room in the Manor House our own.'

'What can you mean?' asked Lizzie, looking up laughingly from her work. 'What domestic revolution are you anticipating? Do you think Morton is going to turn the Manor House into a phalanstery or a convalescent hospital?'

'No; I believe his madness will take another turn,' answered Tiny, tilting her chair so as to command a good view of her instep, set off by the Madame Angot boot which she was to have exhibited at the garden party. 'His lunacy will take a matrimonial form.'

The malicious intention of the words was unmistakable. Lizzie's bright young face crimsoned.

'I don't think you need have any apprehension on that score. Your brother is not likely to forget Miss Courtenay for a long time to come,' she said quietly.

'Oh, if he were left to himself, I dare say he might prove a bright example of constancy, and go down to his grave a bachelor. But is it not Thackeray who says that any young woman may marry any young man, provided that she makes up her mind to have him? I believe Thackeray knew the seamy side of human nature too well to be mistaken.'

'Very likely,' answered Lizzie, trying to be cool and indifferent in her tone, though her cheeks were poppy-red : 'but I am not aware that any young woman has made up her mind about Morton.'

'Are you not?' cried Tiny ; 'then you must be more simple than a sheep-faced Dresden shepherdess. I know who has made up her mind to have him. When a young woman foregoes rest, and sleep, and food, and comfort, to watch by a young man's sick bed—when she hangs about him in his convalescence like a mother over a sick baby, when she follows him, and flatters him, and fosters his fads and his crotchets, and openly, patently adores him before the eyes of all people—when she, by so doing, establishes a claim upon his gratitude, which culminates in cobs and carriages, don't you think the lookers-on must be very blind, and very dense, if they cannot see how the play is going to end?'

Lizzie Hardman started to her feet, pale as death, her eyes flashing, a whole lapful of baby garments scattered on the carpet, her vigorous young frame trembling from head to foot.

'What?' she exclaimed, 'are you mean enough, base enough, vile enough, to think that, when I was doing what I knew and felt to be my duty, I was trying to worm myself into your brother's affection, in order that he might, in some weak moment, ask me to be his wife?'

'I am not going to beat about the bush, if Tiny is. That is precisely what we both think you are doing,' said Horatia.

'Then I will not live under the same roof with you another day,' cried Lizzie, gathering up the baby petticoats, and cottons, and scissors, which she had flung down in her wrath.

'Does that mean that we are to go?' said Horatia, with her strong-minded air.

'You know what it means well enough. You are the mistresses of this house, and I am a pauper dependent upon your aunt's bounty. You have made me feel that in a hundred ways, which have wounded my self-respect; and only your dear aunt's love, and,'—her voice faltered a little here—'Morton's kindness—have reconciled me to my position. But you have now made it unbearable. Good-bye.'

'Where are you going?'

'That is my business. I am going away from Tangley Manor,' answered Lizzie proudly, as she walked towards the door.

'What are we to do with your cob?' asked Tiny. 'Is he to be sent after you by the carrier?'

Lizzie deigned no reply to this flippant question. She had shut the door before Tiny's last sentence was ended.

The two girls looked at each other in silence for half a minute or so, with something like consternation in their faces.

'Do you think she means to go?' asked Tiny.

'Of course not. She thinks she will frighten us by getting into a passion, and that we shall apologize and let her carry on her artful scheme to the end.'

'If she really were to go, you know, there would be no end of a row with Aunt Dora; and even Morton might be angry,' said Tiny, looking frightened, and feeling that she had gone too far.

'She won't leave Tangley, you little simpleton,' replied Horatia confidently. 'She knows a great deal too well on which side her bread is buttered.'

'There are some people who would eat their bread without butter when their pride is at stake,' mused Tiny, 'and I have a notion that Lizzie is proud, though she has contrived to keep her pride under till this afternoon.

'She will not go,' asserted Horatia. 'I tell you, my dear, a person in her position always studies self-interest before anything. Of course she knows that Aunt Dora means to leave her decently provided for. She would not risk offending auntie. And then where is she to go, do you suppose? To her vulgar factory people at Blackford? Why, she could not endure them for an hour after having lived with us. Don't alarm yourself, Clementine. She will go to her room and sulk for the rest of the day, I dare say; and to-morrow we shall have a tearful apology.'

'I hope it will all come right,' faltered the cowardly Tiny. 'I have a good mind to go to her room and make it up with her.'

'If you were to degrade yourself in such a way I would never speak to you again,' exclaimed Horatia. 'Do you want old Hardman's daughter for your sister-in-law? It would come to that if you went and humbled yourself to her. If she does go it will be a very good riddance. I am not afraid of Morton, if you are, and I will bear the brunt of his displeasure when he finds his devoted nurse, and flatterer, and amanuensis missing.'

'And if she doesn't claim Paragon I shall ride him,' said Tiny. 'He will carry me beautifully.'

CHAPTER XLV.

'WHAT IS THE KEY TO THE ENIGMA?'

THERE was some trepidation in Clementine's breast when she returned to the drawing-room, after dressing for dinner, and found Dora Blake sitting at her favourite window reading the morning paper, while Morton walked up and down the open space on the other side of the room.

'Well, auntie dear, did you enjoy your day with the old fogies at Highclere?' inquired Tiny, with an attempt at her accustomed sprightliness.

'I always enjoy myself with old friends,' answered Miss Blake.

'You are such a devoted old dear. I find Sir Nathaniel dreadfully heavy in hand.'

'What has become of Lizzie?' asked Miss Blake. 'I went to her room just now and found it empty. Is she out?'

'Hardly, in such weather as this, I should think,' said Morton. 'Paragon is in his stable, and ready to kick it to pieces in his exuberant freshness. I have just been offering him the consolation of a bunch of clover.'

'Then where can she be?' exclaimed Miss Blake wonderingly. 'The gong will sound in a minute, and she is always a pattern of punctuality.'

The gong sounded almost immediately, but Miss Hardman did not appear. Clementine felt herself turning pale. Horatia reared her head ready for a fight. Both felt that a crisis was at hand. As they crossed the hall to the dining-room Andrew slid up to Aunt Dora, with a secret, insinuating air, and offered her a letter on a salver.

'Good heavens!' she exclaimed, 'it's from Lizzie. Whatever can the girl mean by writing to me? Is Miss Hardman upstairs?'

'No, ma'am, she went out two hours ago.'

'On foot—and in such weather?'

'She had her waterproof, ma'am, and a hand-bag.'

'A bag! Where could she be going? Some sick person must have sent for her,' said Miss Blake, opening the letter.

'My dearest friend,—Forgive me for taking a step which I feel unavoidable. I am obliged to leave Tangley, and for ever. Pray do not suppose that my love for you is one iota the less because I feel myself compelled to live the rest of my life away from you. I shall never forget your goodness, and I hope you will let me see you as often as we can meet without inflicting trouble upon you or humiliation upon me. When I can think and write more calmly I will try to explain my conduct, but I cannot now. I feel that you will trust me well enough to be sure I shall do nothing wrong, and nothing foolish. I am going to find a home among respectable working people, the only kind of home to which I am entitled. I have one favour to ask you, and that is to tell no one at Tangley the contents of this letter.—Your always loving, always grateful

'LIZZIE.'

They had all seated themselves at the dinner-table before Aunt Dora opened her letter, and every eye had been upon her as she read. Her face was clouded over with a look of the deepest displeasure before she came to the bottom of the page, but she said never a word, and put the letter quietly in her pocket, as if there were nothing particular in the communication.

Morton said grace, and began to dispense the soup.

'And pray, how does Lizzie explain her mysterious disappearance?' he asked carelessly.

The indifference of his tone was reassuring to his sisters, who had been goaded to desperation by the idea that he was really falling in love with their aunt's *protégée*.

'Quite satisfactorily. She has gone to see some of her Blackford friends.'

'On foot—with a hand-bag—and at a moment's notice!' exclaimed Morton. 'What in heaven's name could have induced her to behave in such a way?'

'No doubt there was a good reason for her conduct. She is not a person to act upon a foolish impulse. Her letter is too hurried to explain her motives, but I feel sure that what she has done was wisely done.'

'I have a good mind to go after her directly I have dined, and see what it all means,' said Morton with a great deal more concern than his sisters liked. 'What is her address in Blackford?'

'She has not given me any address,' replied Aunt Dora quietly.

'No address—no explanation! The thing is incredible.'

'She promises to write me a full account of her movements shortly. Pray don't flurry yourself, Morton. Lizzie is a thoroughly sensible girl, and knows how to take care of herself.'

'If she were as wise as Minerva, I should still say that she acted foolishly to-day,' replied Morton, staring blankly at a dish of salmon cutlets, without the least idea that Andrew was waiting for him to distribute them. 'Why could she not consult me, or you, before she went off to these unknown relations? Why could she not drive to the station? Imagine her tramping to Highclere through the mud and rain with a bag on her arm! It is too absurd!'

'If you don't mean to eat any dinner yourself, Morton, you may at least let us go on with ours,' said Horatia, with subdued displeasure.

She was a young lady never wanting in the courage of her opinions. She was prepared to defend her treatment of Miss Hardman, should she be called upon to do so.

The dinner proceeded, but in a very uncomfortable manner. Andrew, the butler, was one of those old servants who know the family affairs almost better than the family themselves know them. His subordinate was his nephew, an honest rustic, supposed to have no more comprehension of, or interest in, passing events than if he had been a cellaret or a plate-warmer. So there was no restraint upon conversation on account of the presence of these two. Yet conversation flagged wofully. Aunt Dora looked pale and unhappy, and could hardly eat anything. The two girls indulged in brief spurts of unnatural vivacity. Morton was obviously out of temper. He neither eat nor drank, but vented his ill-humour in abuse of the dinner.

'Veal again,' he ejaculated savagely. 'Duck. None for me. Hideously indigestible. What can Vicars mean by ducks and veal? Is she going out of her mind? I cannot understand her conduct. Did she go by the omnibus, do you think?'

'Are you talking of the cook or of Lizzie?' asked Horatia.

'Lizzie, of course. She must have caught the Austhorpe 'bus at the cross roads. Silly girl! as if she could not have gone in the brougham.'

'She might not wish to appropriate *all* the carriages,' said Tiny spitefully.

'And to leave no address! How are we to send her letters—her luggage? She must have been beside herself when she went. Auntie, can you offer any explanation of her conduct?'

'I don't think we need discuss it at this moment,' answered Miss Blake quietly, feeling that this one particular subject should be kept sacred even from the confidential Andrew.

Morton pished and pshawed, and flung himself back in his chair, turning a stony eye upon the tart and pudding which were offered him, and refusing to be comforted with salad or cheese-straws. Clementine nibbled her cheese-straw, and trifled with her glass of claret, just as if dinner were going on in the most cheerful manner; and to Morton's impatience it seemed an hour or so before Andrew had solemnly scraped up the last crumb in his silver shovel, and had reconciled his mind to the necessity of leaving the room. At last, however, he was gone, and the family were alone at the festive board, where the decanters and Derby fruit dishes reflected themselves in the shining oak, just as they had done when Geoffrey Blake first dined in his new house. Morton leant with folded arms on the table, and looked straight across at his aunt.

'Now,' he said decidedly, 'the servants are gone, and we can have this matter out. What is the key to the enigma? Lizzie would never dream of leaving this house in such a manner without some powerful motive. What is that motive? Has she been summoned to some relative's death-bed? Has she been called away to nurse some one?'

'Her letter does not say so.'

'What other reason can she possibly have? Please let me see her letter.'

'I don't think I should be justified in showing you the letter. It is written hurriedly, and with evident agitation, and was intended for my eye alone.'

'Do you think I shall find fault with the spelling, or because the I's are not dotted?' asked Morton, with an angry laugh. 'I have a right to see that letter.'

'I really cannot recognise that right, Morton,' answered Dora Blake, with just the faintest ray of pleasure in her countenance, which till this moment had been full of care. 'Lizzie is all the world to me, but she can be very little to you; although you have been good enough to give her the shelter of your roof, just as you would have done had she been a pet dog of mine.'

'What nonsense you talk!' cried Morton, jumping up from his chair. 'I have no patience with such absurdity. She is a great deal to me—my adopted sister, my companion, my true and faithful friend! Very little to me, indeed! Why, she has been my right hand for the last three months. I shall hardly know what to do with myself without her.'

Tiny and Horatia looked at each other across the table, the elder red, the younger pale, with vexation. Their worst fears were confirmed. That ridiculous gift of cob and carriage was only the forerunner of other more fateful offerings; their brother's heart, hand, and fortune.

Horatia took up the gauntlet.

'One might think you might contrive to exist without an adopted sister, when Providence has blest you with two actual sisters, who are just sufficiently well educated to read aloud and write from dictation,' she said with an injured air.

'But neither of which sisters would put herself out of the way for the space of one summer morning to oblige me,' answered Morton.

'Because a real sister has no motive for such toad-eating,' cried Clementine, bristling with offended dignity. 'Because a real sister has no end to gain by flattery and servility. I dare say if I were a penniless dependent like Lizzie Hardman, I might be capable of just as much meanness, in the hope of getting a rich husband, though I'm sure I should hate myself for it.'

Morton's eyes flashed honest indignation at his sister, as he listened to her viperish speech.

'I think I can understand now why Lizzie went off all in a hurry,' he exclaimed. 'The letter, please, Aunt Dora.'

He had walked round the table, and was standing by his aunt's side holding out his hand for the letter, with an authoritative air. She gave it him without a word.

'There is not a syllable about a summons from her Blackford friends,' he said when he had slowly read the letter. 'And she talks about leaving Tangley for ever. She could only have come to such a decision because she was wretched here. And a week ago she was the gayest and brightest of us all—full of life and spirits, as happy as the day was long. Had she any quarrel with you, auntie?'

'Quarrel with me! Why, the dear child never displeased me in her life. She is all that is good.'

'And yet deserts you at a moment's notice. That seems extraordinary.'

'But I think your sisters may be able to explain it,' said Dora.

'I think so too,' said Morton, glancing angrily at Clemen-

tine. 'I left you both in the drawing-room with Lizzie after luncheon. You must know what put it into her head to go off in this way.'

'I only know that she got into a furious passion at something that Horrie or I said to her—mere chaff—and bounced out of the room like a termagant,' answered Tiny, with an innocent air.

'She is usually so good-tempered. Surely chaff, as you elegantly call it, could never have provoked her into leaving Aunt Dora.'

'She is very sweet-tempered to you,' said Horatia, 'but she is not quite so amiable to us.'

'How dare you say anything so unjust and untrue, Horatia?' exclaimed Miss Blake. 'I know how Lizzie has borne with you both.'

'Oh, then there has been need of forbearance on Lizzie's part?' Morton inquired, determined to sift this social mystery to the bottom.

'I know that Lizzie has been made to feel her dependent position here ever since she was old enough to be sensitive,' said Aunt Dora.

'Then my sisters have been very despicable,' cried Morton indignantly. 'Dependent, indeed! When she has been the most valuable person in the house—after you, Aunt Dora. Valuable in the house, and out of it—the mainspring of other people's comfort. And that she should be tyrannized over by two young ladies who have not an unselfish thought, whose rule of life is the indulgence of their own whims! It is shameful; and I am ashamed of having such sisters.'

The two girls rose simultaneously, as if they had been moved by the same clockwork.

'I think it is we who ought to have gone away,' exclaimed Horatia. 'Evidently we are not wanted here, and the sooner we find another home the better. It is fortunate for us that papa has left us incomes which at least make us independent. I suppose even we may be allowed the use of the brougham to drive us to Highclere to-morrow morning.'

'You can make fools of yourselves in any manner most agreeable to you,' answered Morton coolly, as he went out through one of the French windows that opened on to the lawn.

He had never been more angry; he had hardly ever been more agitated. His sense of right and justice was outraged by the thing that had been done. It galled him to think that he had two such vulgar young women for his sisters.

'I suppose it is an innate caddishness which must come out somewhere,' he said to himself in bitterness of spirit. 'The taint of the gutter—the original sin of low birth.'

And then he thought of Lizzie, his faithful nurse, his sym-

pathizing companion, the only woman who had entered into all his plans and understood his views. Dulcie had been very fond of him as a lover; but she had not cared a jot about him as a political economist. Cultured, well read as she was in the whole range of elegant and imaginative literature, she was horribly uninformed about the needs and the sufferings of mankind, the government of the land in which she lived. She considered political economy as a dry-as-dust something outside the circle of her life and thoughts, like logarithms, or Sanscrit; and she had always yawned a little when her lover expounded his philanthropic theories.

Lizzie had shown herself so intelligent—not pretending an interest, but really feeling it,—helping him with ideas as well as with sympathy; telling him without scruple the weak points in his schemes, the flaws in his arguments. She had forced him to respect her as well as to be grateful to her. And now she had been driven out of his house, goaded to desperation by the malicious speech of two unmannerly girls.

So great a wrong was not to be permitted. It must be set right, somehow, and immediately. He roamed about the garden for half an hour, feeling that he could hardly endure existence in the house that held his vixenish sisters; and he wasted half an hour in the stable, devoting the greater part of the time to fondling the cob, who had been bedded down for the night, and stood up to his knees in golden straw. It was striking nine when Morton went slowly back to the house, where the lamps had only just been taken into the sitting-rooms.

He did not go to the drawing-room, but to his Aunt Dora's room, feeling that she was likely to prefer solitude to the society of her nieces. His instinct had not misled him. Miss Blake was at her davenport, writing in the soft light of her shaded lamp.

'Auntie, what are you going to do about Lizzie?' asked Morton, seating himself near his aunt, and coming to the point at once.

'I am at this moment writing to her uncle, Joseph Hardman. I fancy she must have gone to his house. I can think of no other place to which she could go.'

'What is Joseph Hardman?'

'A mechanic. He is employed at a foundry, I believe. Lizzie's two sisters were brought up by his wife, and her brother lives with his uncle too. I believe that Lizzie, in her quiet, unobtrusive way, has always been very good to her uncle and his wife, as well as to her brother and sisters.'

Morton looked at his watch.

'It would be too late to telegraph, even if I were to ride to Highclere on the fastest horse in the stable,' he said with a sigh.

'Ever so much too late. But the letter will do as well as a

telegram. There is no need for desperate hurry. Lizzie is such a thoroughly sensible girl that she is sure to manage her life properly, even away from us.'

'But there is need for hurry,' cried Morton impetuously. 'She must not think that you and I consent to her leaving Tangley. Not for a day, not for an hour, longer than can be helped. She must not be allowed to suppose that she has been turned out of doors—my poor Lizzie—the gentlest, most self-denying creature.'

He was almost unmanned at the thought of how badly she had been treated, and his eyes were moist as he started up from his chair and began to pace the room.

'Have you the remotest notion of what it is my sisters dislike in her—or why they have treated her so infamously?' he asked presently.

'"Infamously" is rather too strong a word,' said his aunt, smiling at his vehemence. 'They have never been particularly kind to her, and they have always taken pains to let her feel the distinction between her position and their own, in spite of all I could do to bring them up on a perfectly equal footing. Perhaps they have resented my affection for her, though Heaven knows my heart is big enough to hold all three. Since your illness I think they have been inclined to be jealous of your regard for her, and to fancy that you prefer her to them.'

'I do, infinitely,' said Morton. 'She is worth a shipload of such girls. She is one in a thousand. Next to Dulcie she is the sweetest woman I ever met. But why should they be jealous of a girl whom I regard as an adopted sister?'

Miss Blake's heart, which had glowed with triumph at the beginning of Morton's speech, was somewhat chilled by the conclusion.

'Your gift of the carriage'—— she began.

'Surely they are not mean enough to grudge her that. I remember Clementine went on about the cob in a very ridiculous way, but I thought that was only her fun.'

'I fancy it was just such fun as that which drove Lizzie out of the house. A high-spirited, sensitive girl would hardly stay in any man's house if she were accused of setting her cap at him,' answered Aunt Dora, with eyes bent watchfully on her nephew's perturbed countenance.

'Setting her cap at me! Too ridiculous!' ejaculated Morton. 'Why, everybody who knows anything about me must know that I have done with all matrimonial schemes—that courtship and marriage are a closed volume in the book of my life.'

'A young man does sometimes—once in a century or so—get cured of such a sorrow as yours, Morton, and find perfect happiness where he least thought to win it.'

'I am not that kind of man, and Lizzie knows it. I have talked more freely to her than to any one else. I have treated her more like a brother than a sister. It is utterly shameful and wicked if those girls have teased her with insinuations of that kind. There is not the slightest ground for them either in her conduct or mine.'

'I know that,' admitted Aunt Dora meekly.

'However, I shall go to Blackford to-morrow, and find out this Joseph Hardman's house, and bring Lizzie home with me.'

'Don't you think that by such an act you might give your sisters some ground for their suspicions?' asked his aunt.

'What do I care for their suspicions?'

'Or might you not even compromise Lizzie in the minds of other people? You know your own feelings, and that she can never be more to you than an adopted sister. But other people will insist upon having their own ideas, and on disseminating them. Had you not better let me fetch Lizzie from Blackford?'

'Yes, that would be better. Lizzie would like that better, no doubt. I had that plan in my mind when I came in just now. If you will go to-morrow, dearest auntie, and insist on her coming home with you immediately, I shall be eternally gratefull.'

He gave his aunt a most affectionate hug, by way of earnest.

'My dear Morton, there is no occasion for gratitude,' she said, smiling up at him in the lamplight. 'I am much more anxious to have Lizzie home than you can possibly be. It is very kind of you to be so warmly interested in her welfare.'

'I should be a brute if I could feel less warmly, after all her goodness to me,' replied Morton.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A LAND OF CHIMNIES AND SMOKE.

Lizzie turned her back upon Tangley Manor that rainy July afternoon with a heavy heart. Pride gave her a kind of spurious force. She had always been a girl of resolute will, able to conquer difficulties, to set a curb upon feeling, to achieve and to endure; but never in the past had she so much needed courage and determination as she needed them to-day. She had made up her mind that to remain another day in Morton Blake's house would be to sacrifice womanly honour and self-respect. She had been openly charged, in the grossest words, with scheming to win him for her husband. Her only justification, in the eyes of

these insolent girls, her only possible assertion of her own dignity, lay in immediate departure—in putting herself out of Morton's reach for the rest of her life.

'Or at any rate till I am old and gray,' she said to herself, as she put on her neat little felt hat, and comfortable waterproof Ulster. 'Perhaps thirty or forty years hence, when I have fought my way through this difficult world, and gained a decent position by my own labour, I may feel justified in seeking him out, and asking him to take up the thread of our broken friendship. He will be famous by that time, I hope; a Cabinet Minister, the saviour of his country, perhaps. Oh, how proud I should be of his reputation, even when my feelings were blunted by age and hard work!'

Her nerves were strung to their utmost tension, her brain was in that excited state in which vivid thoughts and fancies follow each other in swiftest succession.

'Poor Morton,' she thought, with a sigh, as she paused absently in the task of packing her travelling bag, 'I believe he will miss me a little.'

If it was painful to think of leaving Morton, how much more bitter must be the thought of leaving her friend and protectress, the woman who had given her all a mother's love and thoughtful care, all a sister's sympathy and companionship. Lizzie dared not let her mind dwell upon the idea of separation from Aunt Dora. She sustained herself with the hope that their parting need not be life-long. They might meet and be together at times and seasons. It was only her severance from Morton which must be lasting.

'Not for the world would I let those cruel girls think that I was acting a part—that I was only playing at going away,' she said to herself. 'I must act in such a way as to make them know and feel that I am thorough.'

Even in her flurry and confusion of mind she was able to think rationally of the plan of her future life. She had received her quarter's allowance from Miss Blake only a few days ago, and she had the whole amount in hand—five-and-twenty pounds. With that sum in her pocket she felt equal to finance the situation until she could find some kind of remunerative employment for her head or her hands. Without either arrogance or vanity she knew that she was clever with both hands and head.

It was an unknown thing for her to be setting out on a journey alone, and it was with a strange and desolate feeling that she stood at the cross roads, bag and umbrella in hand, waiting till the omnibus from Austhorpe should come blundering and creaking along the muddy lane, and heave-to under the signpost yonder, the coachman pulling up his horse with a sudden clutch of the reins, astonished at the unwonted spectacle

of a passenger. Yes, it was strange and dreary to be alone ; but lovingly as she had leaned on Aunt Dora in the past, Lizzie Hardman had learned long ago to think and work for herself, and she had a brave, independent spirit.

'I had rather bear separation from all I love than be thought capable of meanness,' she said to herself.

A jolting half-hour's progress in the mouldy little omnibus, which smelt of poultry yard and stable ; and then she found herself at the Highclere station, an unlovely building, offering nothing cheering for the eye to rest upon save the pictured presentment of a newly-developed watering-place, unknown to the mind of man, but provided with a bay of golden sand, a crescent of Italian villas, a squadron of gaily painted bathing machines, emerald verdure on the very edge of the beach, and sky and sea of sapphire hue. It remained for the adventurous spirit who tried this happy hunting-ground to discover that the Italian villas were still in skeleton, while the existing settlement was a squalid fishing village ; that the drainage was a disgrace to a civilized community, the golden sand a snare, and the sapphire sea a delusion.

Lizzie Hardman looked at the vivid attractions of St. Clement on the Ouse without seeing them ; and then she walked up and down the dismal little platform, and wished that the Austhorpe omnibus had not been so over-considerate in giving its passengers a wide margin of leisure before the starting of the train. But the bell rang at last, and with the help of a friendly porter, Lizzie found a comfortable corner in a second-class carriage. She had always travelled first-class hitherto, but she began her new life in the economic manner in which she would be obliged to continue it.

'I ought to have gone third-class,' she said to herself, as she counted the change out of half a sovereign, and found that her ticket had cost her two and tenpence, 'but I have never been accustomed to sitting with dirty people. I shall have to educate myself down to my altered circumstances. Perhaps, after all, when I have once got over the pain of parting from those I love, I may be happier as a lonely waif fighting my way in the world than I could ever have been as a dependent in Morton's house. Oh those girls ! how they have made me suffer ! '

She looked back at her life during the last four years, since she and Morton's sisters had grown to womanhood ; and she almost wondered at herself for her patient endurance of all the petty slights and deliberate snubs that Clementine and Horatia had inflicted upon her.

'I hope I am not mean-spirited for having borne it all so tamely,' she thought. 'But no, I had auntie's love to make up for all their unkindness. It was auntie's pleasure I had to study.

To have resented such small injuries would have been only temper and false pride. They never insulted me until to-day.'

She sat looking out of the window at a country which was altogether new to her. She had never been at Blackford since her infancy. Aunt Dora had thought it well to make the severance between Lizzie and her brother and sisters as complete as possible. She was to occupy a different place in the world. By-and-by, after her adopted mother's death, when she should find herself amply provided for, she might be as bountiful as she liked to her family, but she could never be one of them. Education, surroundings, associations, would make a gulf between them. There was no pride or hardness in Dora Blake's nature, but she felt that half-measures here would be a mistake.

'You must not think me unkind, darling,' she said one day, when Lizzie had asked permission to go to Blackford and see her brother and sisters, who wrote her such nice letters in a copperplate hand, with very few faults in spelling, and who were always so prettily grateful for her presents; 'but when I took you for my adopted daughter I told your poor father that you were to belong to me entirely, that my relations were to be your relations, that you were to be a Blake and not a Hardman, and that I should hold myself responsible for your prosperity and happiness in life. She can never be more than a friend at a distance to her brothers and sisters, I told him. Your father was quite willing that it should be so. He told me that he gave you to me as a free gift, for the love of his father's bosom friend and companion, Geoffrey Blake, and that you should be as much my own property as if you were a little negro girl bought in an African market-place.'

Lizzie had obeyed her adopted mother, submitting to be guided by her superior wisdom, yet not without regret for the brothers and sisters who were never to have any intimate share in her life. All the kindness that it was in her power to show them she had freely given, and her letters had been full of affection for the kindred whose faces she had never seen.

Thus it was that the country between Highclere and Blackford was new to her, and she watched the passing landscape with curious eyes. For some time the scenery was purely pastoral, low-lying meadows, meandering streams, a wooded hill-side in the far distance, water-mills, sleepy villages, all the poetry of rustic life. Then the whole character of the scene changed all at once, and Lizzie beheld a district which was to her as a new world, a sudden revelation of ugliness under a smoke-tarnished sky. Brickfields, chemical works, tall chimney shafts, gas works, bone-burning works, all the hideousness of a manufacturing neighbourhood. But worst of all was the baneful atmosphere,

tainted with all the variety of nauseous odours, dull with smoke, oppressive to the lungs, depressing to the spirits, thick and slab like the witches' gruel; an atmosphere in which hope and joy must surely drop their wings and expire like a pigeon in an exhausted receiver.

And now the open wastes, the brickfields were all gone, and the train was panting its slow way over the crowded house-tops of a dingy city; and now it was in the smoke-begrimed terminus, doors were slamming, porters shouting, and Lizzie Hardman knew she had reached her destination.

Having nothing but her bag to carry she would not indulge in the luxury of a cab. She had never been in London or any really large town, her travels having been confined to sundry excursions to pretty sea-side places, and to the English lakes, with Aunt Dora. She had therefore no idea of distances, and fancied that her Uncle Joseph's house could not be far off.

She asked a porter to direct her to Milton Street.

'That will be in the Potteries,' answered the man. 'It's a longish way. Hadn't you better have a fly?'

'No, thank you, I am a good walker.'

The man directed her. It sounded a long way, and after she had come to the Ultima Thule of his direction she was to inquire of somebody else, who would instruct her in the rest of the way.

The rain was over, the sun was setting—a magnificent sunset in the country, no doubt, but here only a lurid patch of red gleaming athwart a bank of lowering cloud. Lizzie walked briskly down a long, smoky street, where shabby shops and shabbier private houses alternated, and where the dirtiest children her eye had ever beheld were at play in the gutters. Her soul sank within her at the foulness, the unlovely sights which greeted her on every side; and as she trudged bravely along, following the porter's direction, now passing the blackened wall of a factory, now walking beside the slate-coloured water of a canal, she kept repeating wildly with maddening iteration, and to the beat of her own footsteps,—

'God made the country and man made the town.'

It was a weary way to the district known as the Potteries, which seemed to have been so christened for no particular reason save the whim of the builder, inasmuch as there were no potters in the place. To Lizzie it seemed the longest walk she had ever taken in the whole course of her life, and yet her light footsteps had carried her many a mile by lane and meadow, by heath and hill. The narrow, monotonous streets seemed interminable; of the factories and ironworks, the bone-burning and the soap-boiling, there appeared no end. Lizzie fancied she must have been travelling through that dull gray world for hours when a foundry clock struck the third quarter after eight,

and she knew that it was only three-quarters of an hour since she had left the terminus.

And now she was at the end of her journey. This was Milton Street, in the Potteries—evidently a new district—a raw, bare-looking street, tolerably wide, tolerably clean and tidy, but hideously flat and monotonous, never a porch, or verandah, or jutting window to diversify the plain brick fronts of the square eight-roomed houses; never a flowering creeper to beautify the dull brickwork.

Lizzie knocked at the door of twenty-seven, her Uncle Joseph's number. Her heart beat hard and fast as she stood waiting for admission. How would her kindred receive her? Would they be warm and loving to her in her desolation? Would they reproach her for having kept herself aloof from them in the past? It was a painful ordeal, to meet those of her own flesh and blood, so near, and yet so distant—strangers whose faces she had never seen within her memory—sisters who had been nestled in the same motherly bosom.

'I hope they will love me a little in spite of everything,' she said to herself.

CHAPTER XLVII.

FROM DARKNESS INTO LIGHT.

WITHIN ten days of that balmy summer afternoon on which Morton Blake had sat beside Mrs. Green's death-bed and heard from dying lips the story of the past, the church bell was tolling heavily upon the sultry July air, and a modest funeral train was slowly winding its way across the level fields to the old churchyard. They were taking poor, tired-out Lucy to her last rest. The widower led the little procession, serious for once in his useless, frivolous life, holding sad, sensible Mattie by the hand, the girl grave with the sense of new responsibilities, but tearless, though her pallid cheeks bore the traces of many tears. The little ones followed, stumbling over the clover and sorrel bloom, looking about them with vague wonder, as if surprised to see the flowers so bright and the sky so blue while poor mammy was being carried to the black, ugly pit-hole, of the nature of which last resting-place they had derived somewhat pagan views from the conversation of the small servant-maid. And lastly, with the youngest girl's chubby hand in hers, came Dulcie, robed in black, with sweet, mournful face and downcast eyes.

Mr. Haldimond started a little when he saw Dulcie in the group of humble mourners. His heart thrilled at this latest proof of her tenderness, her sympathy with all human sorrow,

This was true Christianity, an unconscious imitation of the Divine Master, who never turned from human sorrow, who was never deaf to the mourner's cry.

'What a lovely world this would be if all women were of her mould!' he thought. 'Death would, indeed, lose its sting, sorrow would be tempered with joy.'

Later, when they were standing by the open grave, and the clods of clay fell with dismal sound upon the coffin lid, poor Mattie's fortitude suddenly gave way. She flung herself down by the edge of the grave, with a shrill, despairing cry—'Mother! mother!'

Then Dulcie gently raised her from the ground and held her in her arms, the streaming eyes hidden on her shoulder, till the last sad words had been spoken, when she drew the sobbing girl away, keeping her arm round her while they walked slowly to the gate.

'Oh, let me stop, let me stop!' cried Mattie. 'I am not going to leave her there,—all—alone.'

'Dear child, she is not there, she is not alone. She is in Paradise with the happy souls that rest from their labours, waiting for the coming of their God. You know she is not there, Mattie. You know that the soul cannot die, that if you do your duty here you will see her and be happy with her in heaven.'

'Yes, I know, I know,' sobbed Mattie. 'I try to believe—but it is very hard—after having seen her in her coffin—not to remember that she is lying there—in that dark hole. Please, please, Miss Courtenay, let me go back and sit beside her for a little while.'

'Not to-day, dear. We will both go to-morrow, and take some flowers for her grave. You must come home with me now.'

'Hadn't I better go with the little ones, if I mustn't go with her?'

'No, dear, your father will take care of them.—Mr. Green, will you let Mattie go home with me for an hour or two?'

'Oh, Miss Courtenay, I'm proud for you to notice her,' said the impressionable musician, with tears in his eyes.

So Dulcie led Mattie across the fields to Fairview, comforting her with sweet, hopeful words as they went along. Once Mattie embarrassed her by a sudden question.

'Yes, miss, I know what you are telling me is all true—but, if it was your father who was lying in that grave, do you think the thought of seeing him in heaven—after years and years—when you are an old woman, would make up to you for the loss of him now?'

'Not just at first, perhaps, Mattie. But I think the hope

would brighter and stronger every day—if I could believe that my father were sure of heaven,' added Dulcie, in a low voice.

'Oh, Miss Courtenay, a gentleman like your papa would never do anything wrong,' protested Mattie, with conviction, almost as if she would have said,'Of such is the kingdom of heaven.'

They went into Dulcie's morning-room, where the sun was shining through the stained glass in the old Tudor window, and where the octagon table stood ready with tea-things, and cakes, and strawberries in white china baskets. Never had Mattie's eyes beheld such a table—a feast so delicately tempting, yet so arcadian in its simplicity. The brightness of the room, with its variety of colour, dazzled the girl's eyes. She forgot even her grief in her wonder at this glimpse of an unknown world, the world of wealth and taste.

Dulcie made her little friend sit down in one of the low basket chairs, by a tiny tea-table, and then she waited upon her, and petted her, and coaxed her to eat a few strawberries, and to drink a refreshing cup of tea. While she was kneeling at Mattie's side, tempting her languid appetite with pound cake and big strawberries, Scroope opened the door and ushered in Mr. Haldimond.

Dulcie started to her feet instantly, and seated herself somewhat shyly at the tea-table, her cheeks dyed with unnecessary blushes.

'I have come to beg a cup of tea,' said Mr. Haldimond, 'and to have a chat with Sir Everard, if he is at home.'

'He is at home. But I am taking tea an hour earlier than usual, on Mattie's account. Will you go to papa's study for your talk?'

'Yes, when you have given me some tea. Well, Mattie, Miss Blake tells me you are going to stay at Austhorpe with us, and that you hope some day to be mistress at our school.'

Mattie smiled faintly at this idea, which seemed to her to suggest the wildest ambition.

'Miss Blake has been very kind to us,' she said. 'She is going to let us keep the cottage, and we are all to live here instead of going back to poor father, and she will call every day to look after us till I am old enough to take care of the little ones quite by myself.'

'Are you glad to stay here?'

'Very, very glad. Father will come to see us once a month. He says he would come oftener, but he can't afford the railway fare, you know. He is to bring Miss Blake as much money as he can, to pay for our food and different things, and she will make up what is wanted.'

'Don't worry yourself about money matters, Mattie. They will be made easy to you,' said Dulcie, looking lovingly at the

serious little face, so aged by premature knowledge and premature care.

Mr. Haldimond stayed with them for nearly an hour, cheering Mattie by his kindness, and exercising as soothing an influence upon Dulcie's spirits, though she would scarcely have owned as much. An indescribable sense of peace stole over her mind as she sat by the open window, looking idly across the rich summer landscape, and listening to Arthur Haldimond's voice as he talked of his day's experiences in and about Austhorpe. He spent the greater part of every day in visiting among his parishioners, most thoroughly fulfilling the promise of his first sermon that he would be one with them in their griefs and in their joys. He kept his evenings only for his books, which were the delight of his life.

At last he rose, very reluctantly, and wished Dulcie good-bye.

'I may not see you when I leave your father,' he said ; and though she was longing to ask him to come back to the morning-room when his business in the study was over, she had not courage to utter the simple request that would have ensured his return.

'There must be something formidable about him, though he is so kind,' she thought, 'for I cannot help feeling afraid of him.'

She had seen him several times since their meeting in Mattie's chamber, but he had never troubled her by the slightest allusion to their conversation that day.

He had been so completely at his ease with her, so calmly kind, that she found it difficult to believe that this was the same man who had so passionately declared his love. His perfect tranquillity of manner reassured her, and though she could not feel quite at her ease in his presence, she had no fear of his troubling her peace by pressing his suit any further.

'I hope he will always be my friend,' she said to herself ; 'I would not forfeit his friendship for the world.'

Mr. Haldimond found Sir Everard in his book-room. He was sitting at his writing-table in front of the open window. Books and papers were before him, but he was utterly idle, looking out at the landscape over which the yellow light was changing to the softer hues of evening. He held out his hand to Arthur Haldimond without a word. A curious friendship had grown up between the two men. The elder seemed to lean upon the younger as upon a favourite son. Sir Everard, the proud, solitary man, who in twenty years had not made a single friend, had given friendship and confidence without stint to the new-comer. But there are men of rare qualities of mind and heart who have a magnetic power in winning friendship ; and it may be that Arthur Haldimond was one of these.

'You are not looking well, Sir Everard,' he said gently, as he slipped into a chair by the baronet's side.

'I am not well. I am never likely to be well. Don't let us waste words upon my wretched health.'

'But I will talk about it. I think you are using yourself very cruelly. You ought to be driving about the country with Miss Courtenay, or basking in the sunshine on the lawn. But you shut yourself in this room, and brood over your books from morning till midnight.'

'I have no wish to lengthen my days.'

'Not for your daughter's sake?'

'Not even for Dulcie's sake. We have drifted far apart of late. I am no longer necessary to her happiness. She will be happier, more at peace, when I am gone.'

'She loves you with all her strength. For her sake life ought to be dear to you. Oh, Sir Everard, I think you must have read my heart before now. You must feel that I could not have been so often in your daughter's society without learning to love her. She has grown dearer to me than anything else in life, except duty. I am a poor man, entirely dependent on a profession that may not give me more than bread and cheese till my hair is gray, and Dulcie is an heiress; yet I am so sure of my power to make her happy, to guard her from all care and sorrow, to make life bright and fair, and full of meaning for her, that I am not ashamed to ask you to help me to win her. I am not afraid to offer myself as your son-in-law.'

Sir Everard remained silent for some minutes, with his head sunk upon his breast, in earnest thought.

'I should like you to marry her,' he said at last, with deliberation. 'There was a time when I had what people call higher views. I wanted my dear one to be the future Countess of Blatchmardean. Beville is a fine, frank, open-hearted fellow, and I believe he would have made her a good husband. But that is hopeless. She doesn't care a straw about him, and she never will. He is just one of those excellent, generous-hearted young men who never can win a woman's love. If he were a plausible scoundrel he might have a better chance. But you—yes, you would make her happy. You would be staunch and true. You would love and honour her to the end of your life or hers, for her own sake. Do not speak of her fortune. The thought of that has no influence upon me. Wealth has never given me happiness, and it could never of itself make her happy. But you and she together would use money as a means of happiness for many. Yes, she would be happy with you, I believe, Haldimond, if the respect she now feels for you could ever deepen into love. Let her tell me that she loves you, and you may marry her as soon afterwards as

you like. My most urgent prayer is to see her happily married before I die.'

'I thank you with all my soul,' cried Arthur Haldimond, grasping Sir Everard's hand; 'you are the noblest, the most generous-minded of men.'

'Do not thank me till you know more. As my daughter's future husband—for I believe you may win her if you try—there is a page of my history that you ought to know. Be so good as to see that the door is closed, and then come back to your chair. I will tell you what I mean.'

The two men were closeted till the gong sounded for dinner, Dulcie wondering what had kept her father's guest so long. They did not dine till eight o'clock at this time of the year, so as to get the most enjoyment out of the summer weather. The gong had sounded for nearly ten minutes when Sir Everard and Arthur Haldimond came into the morning-room, where Dulcie was sitting in a despondent attitude before the piano, one hand resting idly on the keys, the other supporting her drooping head.

'Dulcie, take Mr. Haldimond's arm,' said her father, 'he is going to spend the evening with us.'

She started up with a brightening face, and obeyed her father without a word. Mr. Haldimond saw the lovely change in her countenance, and his heart glowed at the thought that she was pleased and cheered by his reappearance. There had certainly been a little look of regret in her soft blue eyes when he wished her good-bye.

'Oh, Dulcie, Dulcie, it is well for you to submit to Fate,' he said to himself as they crossed the hall, 'for I mean you to be mine.'

It was long since there had been such a happy dinner for Dulcie; yet Mr. Haldimond was grave and even absent in his manner, as if his mind was overcrowded with thought; and her father was no brighter than usual. The joy and peace in Dulcie's heart had arisen within her in some mysterious way. She knew not from what source this new sense of gladness came; but she could not hide from herself that she was glad. She looked across the table shyly, and met the curate's earnest gaze, and her drooping eyelids hardly dared to lift themselves during the rest of the meal. Yet it seemed to her as if the warmth of that dark glance were on her, like sunlight, all the time, filling her heart with the rapture of life's summer.

After dinner they went back to the morning-room, and Dulcie was glad to take refuge at her piano. How tremulously her fingers touched the first notes of that favourite nocturn!—then how the passion of the music added new force to this strange new gladness in her own soul! till every note seemed to

vibrate within her, as if the melody were the very breath of her life—an emanation of her own mind.

The room was dimly lighted by two lamps under velvet shades—just as much light as made darkness visible. Dulcie played on, believing that her father was still seated yonder in his low arm-chair by the wide tiled hearth, where a group of choice ferns replaced the winter logs. She had scarcely lifted her eyes from the notes since she had placed herself at the piano.

But presently, while her hands were gliding over the keys in a slow legato movement, Mr. Haldimond seated himself at her side, and laid his hand upon hers. She looked up, startled and blushing, and saw that her father's chair was empty, and that she and Arthur Haldimond were alone.

'Dulcie, my darling, you are playing exquisitely; but for me to-night there is more music in your voice than in all Chopin ever wrote. My dearest love, look up. I have been talking to your father, and he has given me leave to win you, if I can; and I mean to do it. He has done more than that. He has told me that it will make him happy to see you my wife.'

'He can say that!' cried Dulcie, shuddering away from the arm that would have drawn her to her lover's breast. 'My father can ask any honourable man to marry his daughter—knowing what he knows—what I know——'

'My dearest, he has confided in me—he has told me all.'

'All?'

'Yes, he has told me the dark secret of his life—and I am deeply sorry for him.'

'Sorry for him?—yes, one cannot help being sorry for him. What must I feel, who have loved him and been loved by him all these years? But will God have compassion upon him, as we have? Can his sin find pardon?'

'It can, it will. If he is sincerely penitent, as I believe he is, God will assuredly pardon.'

'But to let that innocent man suffer—was not that a terrible sin?'

'It was a sin, but I do not believe your father would have let his life be sacrificed had there been no commutation of his sentence. Remember, the penalty Vargas actually paid was only the just punishment of his actual guilt.'

'How good you are! What a load you have taken off my mind!' said Dulcie. 'Yes, I know he is penitent. Twenty years of sorrow! That is a long atonement, is it not?'

'God will accept that atonement, love.'

'Oh, to think that, to believe that, after all I have suffered for the last few months,' said Dulcie. 'It is like coming from darkness into light.'

'And, Dulcie, my beloved, are you going to leave me in

darkness? This world would be very dark for me without you. My dearest, is my case hopeless? I fancied to-night that I saw a ray of hope in your eyes.'

Her eyelids were lowered obstinately, while her left hand strayed idly over the keys, lightly touching the melody she had just been playing.

Arthur Haldimond put his arm round her waist and drew her head upon his shoulder unreproved. It nestled there as if it had found its most natural shelter.

'Dulcie, does this mean that I am to be happier than I ever pictured to myself in my wildest dreams?'

'It means that I love you dearly,' faltered Dulcie, 'though I hate myself for being so horribly fickle. Are you not afraid of marrying such a weathercock?'

'I fear nothing but my own unworthiness. Dulcie, you have made me unutterably happy.'

'Please don't despise me,' she murmured softly, 'but I'm afraid I love you better than ever I loved Morton.'

CHAPTER XLVIII.

IN THE BOSOM OF HER FAMILY.

NUMBER twenty-five was the only house which in some wise broke the monotony of Milton Street in the Potteries. It was a house of an original character, inasmuch as it had no ground-floor. Where the parlour floor and basement should have been there was an archway leading into a builder's yard. The street door opened on a space just large enough to accommodate the door-mat, and give standing-room to the person who entered. Beyond there rose with startling abruptness a steep flight of uncarpeted wooden stairs.

A pretty-looking girl, with an honest face, opened the door in answer to Lizzie's knock. She was dressed in a well-worn stuff gown, of one of those neutral and sternly æsthetic hues which high art has provided for even the humblest wearers. But in spite of high art it was a very ugly gown, and assuredly the vivid puce or grassy green whereat modern taste shudders would have been more cheerful to look upon in the dull Blackford atmosphere.

The breast of the young woman's gown was embroidered with a varied selection of pins and needles, the latter with threads hanging to them, and she had that worn, worried look which is apt to be produced by a prolonged application to needlework.

Lizzie felt that this must be her dressmaking sister, but the words she wanted to say died upon her lips somehow, and she stood looking at the girl dumbly, not knowing how to begin.

'Is Mrs. Hardman at home?' she faltered at last.

'Yes, aunt's upstairs. Did you want to see her?'

'I think you must be Jessie,' said Lizzie, taking the girl's hand.

'That's my name,' answered Jessie, withdrawing her hand, and looking sharply at the stranger, whom she began to suspect as a person of weak intellect, or perhaps a lunatic. 'What's your business, please, miss?'

'Oh, Jessie, can't you guess who I am? Your sister, your own sister Lizzie!'

'Lor!' cried Jessie, giving her an impulsive hug. 'Lizzie! my gracious me!' she shrieked, almost hysterically. 'And you've come to see us at last, after all these years. Aunt said you never would—you was far too proud; but I said you would, whenever you got the chance; and you have. Ain't I glad! Won't I crow over aunt!' Here the vivacious Jessie snapped her fingers, in mingled derision and delight.

'Lor, how glad I am!' she exclaimed again, and Lizzie felt that, although vulgar, the girl was delightfully affectionate.

'Come upstairs, Liz, and have tea or something. How pale and fagged you look! You gave me such a scare just now. I thought you had a wild way with you, and that you weren't right in the upper story,—a loose slate, you know, as brother Bill calls it.'

When a brother's name is William, need affection call him Bill? Lizzie winced a little, feeling that no one with such a name would be welcome at Tangley Manor.

Jessie galloped upstairs, making a tremendous noise in her high spirits.

'Aunt,' she said, flinging open the door of the back room, and ushering in Lizzie, 'here's a rum start! Do you know who this is?'

Mrs. Hardman was poring over a penny periodical, seated on a low wooden stool at an open door, which looked out on a clumsy wooden balcony, whence a flight of wooden steps descended to the narrow bit of yard which the builder could spare from his business premises for the accommodation of his tenants. The room was a kitchen—its chief furniture a deal table, a dresser of the same wood, a much-worn and frayed horse-chair couch, a few oddments in the way of chairs, and a very respectable old eight-day clock, which pretended to record the movements of the heavenly bodies and the progress of the seasons, as well as the hours of the day and night, and aiming at too much, did nothing correctly. Truth to say, the kitchen was in an

advanced stage of litter, and Mrs. Hardman looked as if she had not brushed her hair for a long time. She was a neatly-built, good-looking woman, with sharp black eyes, ruddy cheeks, and a clever face ; but the room and the people altogether had an aspect of absolute vulgarity which filled Lizzie's soul with pain. Yet, as her sister was warm-hearted and affectionate, she felt that she had reason to be thankful and glad.

'She might have received me coldly, and reproached me for having kept aloof from her so long,' thought Lizzie.

Mrs. Hardman flung aside her serial, and jumped up to do honour to the stranger.

'I suppose it's the lady Miss Pincher recommended,' she said, smilingly blandly at the supposed customer.

'No, it isn't, old lady. Ain't we clever? It's somebody I'm better pleased to see than all Miss Pincher's customers, though they was to let me buy all their linings and trimmings, and was never to grumble at my charging eighteen-pence for sundries. It's my sister—my sister Liz. And ain't we pretty?' turning the reluctant Lizzie round as on a pivot, 'and haven't we a nice figure? And ain't we the lady from tip to toe? Oh, you dear old Liz, I'm *that* pleased!'

Jessie gave her sister another hug, and then began to unbutton Lizzie's ulster.

'What a stylish cut! tailor-made, I'll warrant. None of your draper's slops.'

'That's just like our Jess,' said Mrs. Hardman, smiling approval at her elder niece, 'she's all 'art. Never was such a girl for 'art.'

'What!' cried Lizzie, delighted, 'do you draw or paint, Jessie? Have you really a taste for art?'

'Lor, no, child,' cried Mrs. Hardman, 'we've no hartistes here, nor we don't want. I say your sister Jess has a 'art in a thousand. There ain't many a sister made to keep her distance as she's been made that would show so much 'art to-night. Give me 'art,' ejaculated Mrs. Hardman, 'there's nothing like it.'

Lizzie began to understand that she must learn a new language in her new home, a language of erratic aspirates.

'Well, my dear,' said Mrs. Hardman, 'I'm glad to see you now you have come. Better late than never. But you'll have to take us in the rough. If you'd have wrote or telegrammed to us, we'd have had things nice for you—or as nice as they can be in a working man's house.'

'Light the fire and get her a cup of tea, aunt, and don't stand jawing there,' said Jessie, without the least idea of disrespect.

'Please don't put yourself out of the way on my account,' said Lizzie, feeling herself an intruder. 'I can do very well without tea. A little milk and water, and a slice of bread and butter.'

'Nonsense, child! you shall have a cosy cup of tea, and a nice light cake. We'll sit down together, and enjoy ourselves a bit. Jess and I are regular pigs for tea and hot cake. You just run across to Bond's and get two penn'orth of tea-milk, Jess, before they shut up for the night.'

Jessie whisked a jug off its nail, and was halfway down the wooden stairs before Lizzie knew what she was doing. Mrs. Hardman lighted the fire and gave Lizzie the bellows to blow, and then bustled about the kitchen, filling the kettle, making cakes, and setting out the tea-tray on a comfortable little round table. She did everything with a wonderful alacrity, which contrasted curiously with her lazy attitude when Lizzie entered the room. She was a woman whose life was spent in spurts of activity and long intervals of idleness.

Her cakes were made and in the oven, her kettle was singing gaily, the littered appearance of the kitchen was reduced to something like tidiness, while Lizzie knelt before the fire languidly moving the bellows, and wondering at her aunt's quickness.

Jessie came back with the milk-jug, after an absence of a quarter of an hour.

'I wonder you stayed away so long when you was so took up with your sister,' exclaimed Mrs. Hardman.

'Mrs. Bond has got a new baby, and they made me go upstairs to look at it. Such a mite!'

'Where is my sister Mary?' asked Lizzie, who had been too agitated to make the inquiry sooner. 'Doesn't she live with you now, aunt?'

'Why, of course she does, Liz—but she don't come home overearly of a summer evening. When she leaves the workshop she likes to take a walk by the canal with her young man. I suppose you know she's keeping company?'

'She told me she was—engaged,' faltered Lizzie.

'He's a proof reader at the office of the *Blackford Chronicle*; a very respectable young man. My, what that young man knows! He would make you stare—though I suppose you've plenty of book learning.'

'I am very glad she has chosen such a nice person.'

'He's getting five-and-thirty shillings a week already,' said Jessie, 'and it's to be raised to two pounds very soon, and then they're going to get married. They'll take a house in Monksgate, close to the office—such sweet little houses, only six-and-sixpence a week; gas laid on; green venetians and everything. I think our Poll is a lucky girl.'

Our Poll! It was almost worse than 'Bill.'

'And William, is he at home?' asked Lizzie.

'He's gone to the theayter, with father, to see Mr. Mount-

merency take Claude Melnock,' replied Mrs. Hardman. 'Have you ever seen Mountmerency's Claude Melnock?'

'I never saw a play in my life,' said Lizzie.

'Poor thing! Well, I never! Me and Jess must take you. We're rare ones for the theayter. You can't give us enough of it.'

'Oh, I do love the "Lady of Lyons," sighed Jess, with an ecstatic air. 'Mountmerency is heavenly as Claude. You'd never forget the way he walks the stage, with such a grand sweep of his legs, and such a graceful bend of his knees, and the loveliest Hessian boots with gold tassels.'

'And his 'Amleck!' exclaimed Mrs. Hardman.

''Amlet, auntie, not 'Amleck,' corrected Jessie; 'you do pronounce names so queerly.'

'Well, I say 'em as my ear ketches 'em, Jess. I'm no scholard.'

Jess had been taking the hot cakes out of the oven, and buttering them, while she talked. The tea was drawn, the candles were lighted—they had been sitting in the firelight hitherto—the little kitchen, with its litter swept out of sight, had a comfortable look.

Jess insisted upon the visitor occupying the arm-chair, a Windsor chair with a chintz-covered cushion. She poured out the tea, and ministered to her sister lovingly. Lizzie had eaten a light luncheon at half-past one o'clock, and had not broken her fast since, so the tea and light cake seemed positively delicious, and it was nice to be waited upon and made much of by an affectionate sister. She wondered at herself for feeling almost at home in this humble kitchen, with these kindred of hers, who murdered the Queen's English so cruelly, and all whose ideas were different from her own.

'And it is with people like this my life is to be spent in future,' she thought, as she sipped her tea, and let her tired head rest against the back of the chair. 'I have done with refined society, with the grace and beauty of life. I must be a worker among other workers, all of them too busy to cultivate refinement of manners. Well, perhaps it is better to sit in a kitchen where one is loved and thought much of, than to inhabit a fine house upon sufferance, and have one's self-respect wounded twenty times in a day.'

'And how long have they given you leaf to stay with us, Liz?' asked Mrs. Hardman, when she had finished her first cup of tea, and made herself needlessly greasy with cake.

'I have left Tangley for good, aunt. I want you and my uncle to put me in the way of earning my living,' answered Lizzie quietly.

'What?' cried Mrs. Hardman. 'You've been and gone and

run away from the lady as adopted you, and promised your poor father to provide for you 'andsome after her death. You can't have been such a soft as that, child. I can't believe it of you.'

'Money isn't everything in the world, aunt.'

'It's nine-tenths of everything,' answered Mrs. Hardman. 'And you could leave a beautiful home, and kind friends, all for some tantrums, I suppose.'

Lizzie tried to explain her position, without touching on the actual charge that had been brought against her. She told her aunt how she had been wounded by the unkindness of Morton's sisters, how they had accused her of being mean and underhanded in the pursuit of her own interest.

'All tantrums; nothing but tantrums,' exclaimed Mrs. Hardman contemptuously. 'Of course they was jealous of you. That was what you had to look for. But what did that matter to you so long as the old lady was fond of you and stood by you? You should have given them as good as they brought.'

'It's no use talking about it, aunt. I bore their unkindness as long as I could, but to-day it became just a little too bad.' She burst into tears, and let her head fall on her sister's shoulder, that affectionate young person having knelt by her side to caress and comfort her a few minutes before.

'There, aunt, don't you say another word to her,' said Jessie. 'Don't you see she's right down upset? If you go on at her so she'll think she's not welcome here, and be sorry she ever came to such nasty relations.'

'She's as welcome as the flowers in May, and she ought to know that,' replied Mrs. Hardman, with dignity, as if her personal character were a sufficient guarantee. 'But when I see her flying in the face of her own good fortune I must up and tell her so.'

'If I may stay here for a day or two I shall be very grateful,' said Lizzie meekly.

'A day or two! You may stay for a year, Liz. There's no one will grudge you your bite and sup.'

'Thank you, dear aunt. But I will only take advantage of your kindness just for a few days, while I look about me, and make up my mind how to begin life for myself. I have had no quarrel with Miss Blake. I love her dearly, and shall so love her to my dying day. But I can never go back to Tangley Manor.'

'It strikes me there's a lover at the bottom of this,' said Mrs Hardman, looking earnestly at her niece. 'Yes, of course there is. See how she blushes.'

'You're too bad, aunt,' said Jessie indignantly, 'teasing her like this, when she's tired and low. Never mind, Liz; a good night's rest will set you up again, and to-morrow you and

me will have a nice walk round Blackford, and you shall see all the shops. Won't they be a treat to you after your poky country lanes?'

CHAPTER XLIX.

'I WILL NEVER LIVE UNDER HIS ROOF.'

THE dreary wakefulness of Lizzie Hardman's first night in Milton Street, Blackford, was relieved only by feverish snatches of sleep. Her brain was perpetually picturing the scene of the previous day, travelling over the same ground, recalling every word and every look of her tormentors; and then imagination went to work, and pictured all that had occurred after she left Tangley. Aunt Dora would think her ungrateful—Morton would be disgusted at her abrupt departure. No one would say a good word of her. She must needs seem a traitor and an ingrate.

These mental tortures would have been quite enough to keep her awake all night; but bodily discomfort added a last drop of bitterness to her cup. The small, stuffy bedchamber, the lumpy flock bed, were a sore trial after her airy room and comfortable spring mattress. Her bedroom had not been by any means one of the best at the Manor House; its furniture consisted chiefly of old-fashioned articles discarded from the principal apartments; but it was large and airy, with windows that commanded a lovely vista in Tangley Wood. It was perfumed by the roses and jasmine that climbed up to the window-sill; it was kept exquisitely clean; and it was brightened and adorned by Aunt Dora's numerous gifts. What a change to the second-floor bedroom in Milton Street, with its hideous geometrical paper in orange and brown, its patches of gaudy Kidderminster, its coloured counterpane, and flaring pink-and-green abomination in the shape of a fire-stove ornament! Jessie, who had never seen anything better, was rather proud of her bower, and introduced her sister to it with perfect satisfaction of mind.

'There's my Willcox and Gibbs,' she exclaimed, pointing to her sewing machine. 'Ain't it a beauty? I saved up my money to buy it, and it's paid for itself twice over since I've had it. How do you like them vases on the chimley-piece? Jim gave them to me; that's Polly's young man, you know.'

And now it was the first morning of Lizzie's life in her new home. She had been introduced to all her relations—to Uncle Hardman, otherwise Father, which patriarchal title was in his case an honorary distinction, like the freedom of the City to a prince of the blood royal, as he had never had any children; to

her brother William, who had told her she was a pretty girl, and had pledged himself to find her a good husband among his mates at the foundry ; to Polly ; and to Polly's young man, who just looked in at breakfast-time, to inquire if his betrothed would like to see Mr. Mountmorency in 'Richyloo.'

Lizzie found them all friendly, but all outrageously vulgar. The printer's reader was the best mannered and the best informed ; but then, like many self-educated people, he was horribly conceited. He laughed openly at his betrothed's bad grammar, and evidently considered her aunt a very inferior person.

Breakfast was a scramble. Each member of the family provided for his or her own particular meal. Mrs. Hardman fried her rasher on the top of the fire, while Jessie toasted herrings in front of it. William and his uncle began with oatmeal porridge, and wound up with cold hashed mutton and potatoes. The mistress of the house had her teapot ; the girls made cocoa for their own drinking. The combination of odours from the frizzling bacon and herrings was far from agreeable There was no cloth on the table. The plates and cups and saucers were all odd, and mostly cracked. Everybody was in a hurry ; everybody spoke with his or her mouth full.

Lizzie recalled her breakfast of yesterday morning—the pretty room, the snowy damask, soft and rich as satin, the old Indian bowls of crimson and yellow roses—such roses as seemed to grow only at Tangley—the glittering silver, the pretty china, the home-made bread and butter, the fruit and honey, and daintinesses of a breakfast designed to tempt delicate appetites. She had fancied herself strongminded, and yet the loss of these luxurious surroundings troubled her, even midst her pain at being parted from her benefactress, that one great sorrow which she told herself ought to have been her only thought.

The day was bright and sunny, and when breakfast was over, and the family had dispersed, Jessie was eager for the proposed exploration of Blackford's best and busiest streets, but Lizzie begged to be excused for this particular morning. She had a headache, and she had a letter to write—two reasons for staying at home.

'You do as you like, my dear,' said her aunt. 'Our Jess is always glad of any excuse for being idle. If you've got a letter to write, go into the parlour and write it, and don't let no one worrit you.—You'd better be off to your sewing machine, Jess, and try and get them children's frocks done by Saturday night, as you promised the lady. How will you look her in the face, I should like to know, if you can't keep your word ?'

'Lor, aunt, I should say I had a mourning order, of course.'

Lizzie was ushered into the parlour, a room which looked

into the street, and which was somewhat larger and a great deal cleaner than the kitchen. Having lived in a house where daily life was spent in the best and biggest rooms, Lizzie wondered much why her uncle's family herded together in the hot kitchen instead of making use of the cool, clean parlour. She fancied the room must be unhealthy, or that there must be some cogent reason why it should be tabooed by the family.

There was not a thread awry in this state apartment. Scarlet moreen curtains, edged with black velet, draped the window, knitted antimacassars shrouded the horsehair chairs and sofa. There was a good deal of bead-work in the way of mats, and there was a good deal of primitive colour in the way of carpet. The centre table was of mahogany, sticky with much varnishing, and on it were disposed at mathematical intervals two photograph albums and three gift-books.

Lizzie seated herself before this table, and in sheer languor of spirits explored one of the albums.

Oh, what dreadfully common-looking people her sister's friends were! how badly their gowns hung! and how embarrassed they all seemed as to the disposal of their hands! Broad grins alternated with expressions of awful solemnity. Every sitter seemed to have just laid down the same book, on the same richly-carved oak table, in front of the same impossible combination of Grecian Architecture and tropical foliage. She closed the portrait gallery and opened one of the books. It was a cheap edition of Scott's poems, in pearl type, and on the fly-leaf was written, 'To Polly, with Jem's true love, hoping she may find improvement for her mind in these pages.'

It was no use to sit idling there. Her letter must be written sooner or later, her letter of explanation to Aunt Dora. She did not want to lose the afternoon post, but she felt that the letter would be very difficult to write. She did not wish to accuse Clemntine and Horatia of unkindness—she could not speak of the accusation they had brought against her—yet now else could she explain her own conduct?

Jessie had brought her a blotting-book with pens and paper, and a smart green glass ink-bottle was staring her in the face. She had no excuse for dawdling. But when she had dipped the pen in the ink she paused, at a loss how to express herself, and at last threw down the pen with a sigh of disgust, and leant her head upon her hand in deep despondency.

'What are they doing now at Tangley?' she wondered. What was Morton doing? He was in his study, most likely, writing or reading. Did he miss her? Of late she had spent much of her time in his study. He had been teaching her Latin, in order that she might understand any quotation which she might meet with in the course of her reading; and partly that

she might be able to talk him about Horace, whose odes were the only poetry which Morton thoroughly appreciated. Modern verse was too high-strung and metaphysical for his taste—the Byronic school too passionate; but Horace always satisfied him. He was a man for whom a little poetry of a plain straightforward character was sufficient.

Lizzie allowed her fancies to wonder back to the home she had left, and to hang tenderly round the images of those who dwelt there. She thought of her horse, and pictured to herself Morton's morning visit to the stables.

'What will he do with my poor Paragon?' she wondered. 'I hope he will ride or drive him. Dear Paragon! To think that such a well-behaved horse should be the indirect cause of my leaving Tangley! It was Morton's gift of the cob that made those girls so angry.'

While she sat idly thinking, a footstep sounded on the stairs; there was a murmur of voices just outside her door. Surely that was a voice she knew—a Tangley voice?

The door opened as she started to her feet, and in the next moment she was sobbing on Dora Blake's shoulder.

'My darling, I have come to fetch you home.'

'No, auntie dearest, I am not so weak as that,' she answered; struggling with her tears. 'I have not been playing a part; not running away in order that I might be sent for or fetched. No, dear auntie, I was very much in earnest. But I am so thankful you have come, for I can tell you a good deal that I could never have written.'

'I don't want to hear anything. Put on your hat and bid your relations good-bye, and come with me. I have a cab at the door, and we shall catch the one o'clock train for Highclere.'

'Dear aunt, it is quite impossible. I shall never come back to Tangley.'

'Absurd, ridiculous! Just because my nieces have given themselves airs. Temper, Lizzie, temper.'

'No, auntie, it is not temper. I have put up with their airs. That kind of thing never worried me much. Had I not your love to make life sweet? No, it is not temper. But I would not stay in the Queen's house—though it were high treason to leave it—if any one in that house thought me a mean, designing woman.'

'Who ever thought you that, or pretended so to think?'

'Your nieces.'

'Come, Lizzie, half-truths won't do. You must tell me the whole truth. I have a right to know.'

Lizzie could not deny that right, and she told Miss Blake the gist of the conversation which had driven her from Tangley Manor.

'You see, dear auntie, that my own self-respect forbids my return.'

'I cannot see that, dear. What can it matter to you if these girls in their jealousy chose to think you are setting your cap at their brother? You ought to be able to laugh their insinuations to scorn, knowing your own straightforwardness.'

'Yes, I might do that; but they would not hold their tongues. They would put the same notion into other people's minds; perhaps even Morton himself might come to believe it,' concluded Lizzie, turning crimson at the mere thought of such a thing.

'Morton is much too sensible.'

'I hope he is; but I will never live under his roof while he is single. I will not give any one ground for thinking ill of me. Perhaps years hence, when he is married and has a family, he will let me come to Tangley to take care of his house or his children.'

'And what are you to do in the meantime, while he is choosing his wife and growing his family?'

'I have my plans all made, auntie; all I want is to carry them out. I am not going to tell you that I have a mission, or any nonsense of that kind; but I think that as I am a young woman without any close ties or duties, except to love you and be grateful to you, dearest, I ought to do something for my fellow-creatures. Now you know I have done a good deal of nursing among our sick poor, and that I am not a bad nurse.'

'Bad? you are the best nurse I ever had anything to do with. But what has this to do with your future life?'

'Everything. There is a society in London, and at Blackford, for nursing the poor at their own houses, and I am going to become a member of that society, if I can get employed by it. I have read all about it in the newspapers, and I know pretty well what the work is, and what will be required of me. The nurses are ladies by birth and education. They live in a home provided by the society, and they receive a small salary. So, you see, if I can get admitted to the Blackford Home, I shall be quite independent.'

'And you will slave yourself to death.'

'The other nurses have not died of the work. There are some who have been doing it for seven or eight years.'

'I will not hear of such a thing, Lizzie. Philanthropy is all very well, but I will not hear of your youth being sacrificed to the miseries of other people.'

'Oh, auntie, why did you teach me to care for the poor, if you didn't mean me to lead a life of usefulness among them?'

'I did not want you to grow up like my nieces, frivolous and selfish to the core of your heart. But I meant you to have some pleasure in your life; and as yet you have had none. And now you desert me, just when you are most necessary to

my happiness, and you want to join a nursing sisterhood. If you have made up your mind not to return to Tangley, I will make myself a home elsewhere. I will take a house at Avonmore, and you and I will live there together.'

'Force you to leave the house where you were born! No, auntie; not for the world.'

It was in vain that Dora Blake urged, and pleaded, and expostulated. Lizzie was firm as a rock. She had told herself that she must be thorough—and she was thorough, proof even against the entreaties of the friend whom she loved as a mother. The end of it was that Miss Blake went back to Tangley that afternoon completely baffled, and had to acknowledge her failure to Morton, whose disappointment at Lizzie's non-arrival was more intense than the occasion seemed to warrant.

'She is an obstinate girl,' said Aunt Dora, with a sigh. 'She has taken it into her perverse head that she ought to lead a life of usefulness, and she is going to join a nursing sisterhood.'

'And she will wear a ridiculous bonnet,' exclaimed Clementine. 'It all comes from an exaggerated idea of one's own importance in the world, and a desire to distinguish one's self from the ruck of mankind.'

'That kind of ambition will never urge you to sacrifice your own comfort for the sake of other people,' said Morton, with an angry glance at his pretty sister.

'No, I hope I should never be so silly,' answered Tiny, with charming *naïveté*; 'and now, as Lizzie is not coming back, I suppose I may ride the cob. He will splinter his stable into lucifer matches if he doesn't get more exercise.'

'You are very obliging. I shall send him out to grass for a month. Perhaps by that time Lizzie may have changed her mind and come home again.'

'I shouldn't be much surprised if she were home by the end of the week,' retorted Tiny. 'I dare say she is only trying to make a feature of herself by this absurd conduct.'

CHAPTER L.

'THERE WAS NO THOUGHT OF FAIR PLAY THEN.'

A DELICIOUS sense of restfulness came over Dulcie's heart and mind after the evening of her betrothal, the never-to-be-forgotten evening which gave a new colour to her life, new courage and hopefulness to her soul. She was content to trust herself utterly to Arthur Haldimond's care and guidance, to lean upon his strength as against a rock, and to lay down her burden of

fears and difficulties at his feet, knowing that he was strong enough to carry the load ; as a footsore mother, crawling dejectedly on the highway, faint under the weight of a fretful child, feels new life in her limbs when she has transferred her burden to the stronger arms of her husband, so Dulcie having given up her load of care and doubt, was able to contemplate the journey of life under a new and brighter aspect. It was an unspeakable relief for her to know that her father had confided his dark secret to a spiritual adviser ; that he had not gone on to the bitter end, hardening his heart, unpenitent, unconfessed. He had not shrunk from the self-humiliation involved in such a confession. He had not been too proud to own his sinfulness to a fellow-creature.

Her first thought, even in that thrilling moment when she confessed her love for Arthur Haldimond, had been of her father. She had told him that he should always hold the first place in her heart, and she had been nobly faithful to that promise. And now, happy in the love of a man whose nature seemed to her higher, broader, and grander than Morton's, she could but remember the struggle it cost her to give up her first lover, and how in her despair she had believed that no ray of happiness could ever fall across her future life. She had obeyed her father blindly, uncomplainingly ; and lo ! she had her reward, in a more romantic, more exalted love, in the devotion of a lover who seemed to her a king among men.

'Arthur,' she said to him one day, a little while after they were engaged, looking shyly up at the tall figure and handsome head, 'I can't help thinking that Agamemnon must have been like you.'

She fancied he would feel complimented.

'My dearest,' he replied, smiling at her enthusiasm, 'I should be sorry to resemble such a doubtful character.'

'Perhaps I ought to have taken my comparison from the Bible, and said you were like Saul.'

'Not much better, dear love. Those old heroes are infinitely picturesque, but neither history nor tradition can show us many examples of real beauty of character before Christ came to teach men the divinity of love. The grandeur of a just hatred, the splendour of a great vengeance, shine out grandly in the Old Testament ; but charity is a flower of later growth.'

On the evening of her betrothal Dulcie went straight from her lover's arms to her father's study. She wanted to hear from his own lips that he approved her choice, to see a new look of repose and even happiness in his face. She went quietly in, and found him seated in a thoughtful attitude by his writing desk, the lamp throwing its light upon his books and leaving his face in deepest shadow. Dulcie drew softly to his side, and knelt by

his chair, as she had so often done in the days before a sense of severance had arisen between them.

'Father, my beloved father, I am so happy, and I have come to tell you of my happiness. I cannot believe that it is real till I am sure that you approve, that you are content.'

He clasped her in his arms, and held her to his breast for some moments without a word.

'My dearest, I am more than content. I am happier than I ever hoped to be on this side of the grave. Oh, Dulcie, I thought my sin had blighted your life; and now to hear from those dear lips that you are happy—that the future is not all dark to you,—this is indeed comfort. It is the brightest page in the book of a darkened life, Dulcie—a life which your love alone has solaced.'

'Dear father, your life will be lengthened, please God, by our love and care, for you will let Arthur——' her voice trembled a little as she pronounced her lover's name—'you will let Arthur be like a son to you.'

'He shall be as dear as ever a son was to father if he make my darling happy. But my days are numbered, little one. I would not have you cherish a vain hope. God has been very good to me. He has allowed me to see my beloved child's future life lying before her like a fair open country. I can afford to part from her on the threshold of happiness.'

'No, no, no,' she cried, sobbing as she clung to him with despairing love. 'There can be no happiness for me without you.'

'Dulcie, if you knew how weary I am of life—what a heavy burden my remorse has been to carry through all the long years—you have lightened it, love, you have lightened the load—but it has been heavy, and I am so tired that I can think of the grave as a pleasant place of rest; and I can hope—yes, Dulcie, I have taught myself to hope—for peaceful days in a world beyond the grave, where my darling's face may shine upon me like an angel's. Dulcie, there has been a gulf between us of late—was it because you had discovered the one black spot in my life?'

'Not because I loved you less,' she cried eagerly. 'I loved you all the more, after I guessed your sad secret, because I pitied you so much; and I know all about my poor mother—her unhappiness in not loving you as she ought to have done—and how cruelly you were wronged by the friend of your youth. Dearest father, believe me, I have never loved you less.'

'Thank God. I fancied I had lost my Dulcie's love.'

'That could never be.'

'And now there is little more to be done before I shall have lain down my load. I have written to Morton Blake.'

'Oh, father, why have you done that?'

'Because before I leave England for the last time I want to have all things settled between him and me.'

She tightened her arms about him, as if to hold him back from some danger.

'But the risk—the fear that he might——' she faltered.

'Might do what?' Hand me over to the law? I will risk that, Dulcie. I do not think he would bring shame upon you, my poor pet; or that even his revenge would ask for the brief remnant of a broken life. He has hinted at my guilt, in this room. In this room, and in your presence, he shall hear the whole story. Hark! was that the bell? Yes. Perhaps it is he.'

Dulcie listened with fast-beating heart. The doors at Fairview were too substantial for her to hear more than a faint murmur of voices in the hall. Then Scroope open the study door and ushered in Mr. Blake.

Morton looked grave and anxious; but that vindictive light which had once sparkled in his eyes when he speculated upon Sir Everard's guilt, had gone out for ever. He held out his hand to Dulcie, and their hands met for the first time since she had sat beside his sick bed.

'I am about to leave England for ever, Morton,' said Sir Everard quietly, 'and before closing the book of my life—for I shall have done with all interest in this world when I leave this place—I want you to learn the truth about your father and me.'

'Do not trouble yourself,' answered Morton, with a gloomy look. 'I think I know about as much as you can tell me, in your tardy desire to be truthful. The knowledge has come to me in a fragmentary manner, and it has made my life miserable. Six months ago I meant to use that knowledge against you, if ever I should have the power to do so. But now——'

'Now, perhaps, you see that I am dying, and are content to let the last sands run out peacefully——'

'I would sacrifice much for your daughter's sake,' said Morton, with a compassionate glance at Dulcie. 'Do not you think we might as well spare her the pain of this conversation?'

'I know all, Morton. I was in the next room when poor Mrs. Green told you about my mother. Your own words when you were ill, and perhaps half delirious, told me what you suspected. Do not mind me. I know all that can be known, and I shall never love my father less because he has been one of the most miserable of men. Not by his own fault alone, remember. The sins of others have fallen heavily upon him.'

'Yes, Morton, my pleading angel has spoken the truth. I was sinned against as well as sinning. I loved your father once as truly as one man can love another; with all my heart, and mind, and strength, thinking him the truest friend man ever had; admiring and respecting in him all the qualities I knew to be wanting in myself; animal spirits, enterprise, a genial nature, a broad love of mankind. I loved him; and he

perverted the heart of my wife. I trusted him; and he crept into my paradise, and made it hell. He lied to me, as only the seducer of women can lie. He blighted my life as he blighted the life of the woman he pretended to love. A noble love would have spared her; a false and selfish love wrecked her and betrayed me. Do you want to hear the history of that fatal day, when I went out in the morning to meet your father, swearing to myself that before nightfall one of us two should be lying in the dust, resolved that the sun should not set upon us both living men?'

Sir Everard had risen, and stood with his back to the hearth by which he had spent so many lonely hours, his arms folded on his breast. Dulcie stood beside him, one hand resting on his shoulder, as if even by that light touch she would assure him of her loving sympathy.

'I met your father surrounded with his friends, but false as he was, he could not face me with the old familiar smile. Perhaps he expected that I should let loose my passion then and there, and make myself a spectacle for the men who knew him and me, and who may have guessed something of our relations. If this were his idea he was disappointed. I held my peace all day—a long, slow day—during which he and I were often riding near each other. I was biding my time; meaning always to overtake him on the road home, and settle the reckoning between us—somehow. I had no deliberate plan of vengeance, but I meant to punish him. I was as willing to fling away my own life as I was determined to try for his. I had no thought of murder, but I wanted the life which by every law of honour it was mine to claim. "The days of duelling were past," you will say, perhaps. I answer, "No." The right of a man against the friend who had betrayed him, against the traitor who has corrupted his wife, can never cease while the word honour has any meaning in the minds of men.'

He paused for a few moments, exhausted by the passion with which he had spoken those last words; but neither of his listeners broke the silence, and he went on presently in lower and more deliberate tones.

'I overtook him in the twilight, a little way from the pollard oak beneath which he was found. I led my horse for some distance after I passed the cross-roads, and I stopped on the way to pluck a stake out of a hedge—a heavy, murderous-looking stake, with a sharply-pointed end. Vargas's counsel hit the right nail on the head when he tried to show a distinction between a blow from a cudgel and from a stake. When I had provided myself with this weapon, I mounted my horse, and rode sharply after your father, who was walking his horse lazily along in front of me.'

'You must have meant to murder him when you tore up that stake,' said Morton.

'I meant to kill him, fairly or foully. It was for him to choose the manner of his death. I overtook him, and reined my horse up at his side. There is no need for me to repeat our conversation. He lied to me through thick and thin at first, as I suppose men always do in such cases. When he found I was not to be hoodwinked he turned sullen and defied me; told me that my wife had been sold to me—an innocent sacrifice,—that there was less guilt in her loving him than in her pretending to love me; told me that he should go on loving her as long as his heart beat, that he would never give her up, that I might as well try for a divorce at once. He had made up his mind to take her away from me. Would he go over to Belgium with me to-night and meet me to-morrow at Blankenberg? No. Ten thousand times no. He would give me nothing but legal satisfaction. A divorce was the only way out of our difficulty. He had the audacity to speak to me in his old manner, as if we had been friends without a cloud between us. "Look this thing in the face, Everard," he said. "Be reasonable. We have both made a mess of our lives, but other people are to blame for it. There is only one way out of it." "You are wrong," I cried, "there is another way!" and I caught him by the collar and swung him round in his saddle. Then the devil got hold of us both, and we fought like devils; but my rage was stronger than his. He would have compromised matters, and thought himself happy with my cast-off wife. I wanted nothing but revenge. "Do you mean to kill me?" he gasped, when I struck him across the head with the stake. "Yes, that is just what I mean," I told him. He struck at my face with the cane of his hunting-whip, but I caught it and twisted it out of his hand. Then I had him at my mercy, reeling in his saddle, ghastly white, with a slow rivulet of blood trickling down his face—unarmed—helpless. Then and for the first time I felt myself a murderer. There was no thought of fair play then, no thought of life against life. I wanted only to kill him! I thirsted for his blood! I struck him on the head for the second time with all the might of my arm. He dropped sideways off his horse, and the animal galloped away through Blatchmardean Wood. I dismounted and knelt by your father's side, and laid my hand upon his breast, waiting for what I had no expectation of finding, some sign that life was not extinct. He was quite dead; that last blow had been fatal. I dragged him to the ditch and laid him there among the weeds and rushes, and then mounted my horse, jumped the hedge, and rode off across country, God knows where, as if Satan had been hunting me. Three or four hours of purposeless riding, and then I went home, in time to hear my

wife accuse me of her lover's murder, and to see her die, loving him and hating me. That, Morton Blake, is the history of my crime. If you want a life for a life, you have but to denounce me. The evidence you have pieced together may be strong enough to hang me, in spite of all that has gone before.'

'No,' answered Morton after a pause, 'I shall not denounce you. Six months ago I felt so strongly upon this matter that I should have been capable of the most desperate step. I would have sacrificed my own happiness, Dulcie's even, to avenge my father's death. But I have learnt to think differently. He, too, was a sinner—his sin bore its bitter fruit. I shall never lament him less—never feel less execration for the crime that cut short his life,—but his murderer's death on the gallows would not make his last rest more peaceful, his hope of pardon and heaven more secure. You are safe, Sir Everard, from any future pursuit of mine. But you had better do something to silence Vargas's daughter, who has gone back to America broken-hearted because she could not clear her father's name from the stain of a crime he never committed.'

'I will do whatever it may be in my power to do for her,' answered Sir Everard quietly.

'Good night, Dulcie,' said Morton, gently pressing his old love's icy hand. 'Come what may, I shall always think of you with affection.'

And so he left them alone together, father and daughter, no gulf between them now, reunited, united in spirit for ever by perfect confidence and love.

CHAPTER LI.

LIZZIE'S FAILURE.

Lizzie Hardman found that the entrance to her new career as a nursing sister was not free from difficulty. She had, first and foremost, to produce testimonials to character and capacity, and the obtaining of these from Miss Blake and Mr. Jebb occupied time. Then, when she had proved her respectability to the satisfaction of the Lady Superintendent of the Home which she wished to enter, she had to go through a preliminary course of hospital nursing, her duties being of the humblest, hardest kind, in order to prepare her for the higher grade to which she aspired. This hospital work was to last a month, during which time Miss Hardman, as a day nurse, would be allowed to sleep at the house in Milton Street.

She began her workly bravely; but, despite her enthusiasm, the work proved much more arduous, much more painful, than she had anticipated. Hitherto her life had been spent among

familiar faces—she had enjoyed the consideration and respect of her little world. There had been thorns in her cushion at the Manor House; but all the cottagers whose wants she had ministered to round and about Tangley had honoured her as Miss Blake's adopted daughter, and as the medium through which they received Miss Blake's bounty. She had never gone anywhere empty-handed, and she had always been sure of her welcome.

But in this big city hospital, where nobody knew her or cared for her, how different life seemed! The doctors were always in a hurry when they came in contact with her. They spoke curtly; they took no interest in her work—they treated her as a machine. Then the cases were so various and so complicated, the suffering around her was so terrible, that soul and sense sickened as she felt how little she could do to help or to comfort. It had been one thing to sit beside a dying peasant's bed, in some quiet cottage chamber, listening to his hopeful talk about the better land to which he was journeying; but it was another thing to look along the dreary ward where pain-tortured creatures were ready to curse God in their agony, while disease in its most hideous form disgusted the eye that would fain have expressed only sympathy. Lizzie had put her hand to the plough, and she meant to persevere; but there were times when her courage failed utterly, when she walked wearily home to Milton Street with a heart heavy as lead, and shut herself in her little room—the room which she shared with Jessie—to shed bitter tears over her weakness and incapacity.

'I am afraid it is not in me,' she said to herself sometimes in these moments of despondency. 'But I must go on. To fail now would be too contemptible. I should despise myself for my cowardly weakness.'

She could have borne the trials of her daily life better, perhaps, if she could have shut out of her mind all memory of the past. But, unhappily, that past was perpetually in her mind. Her soul yearned for her lost home as Eve may have yearned for the Eden she had forfeited. In the sultry, sickly August days, amid the crime and foulness of the great overgrown manufacturing town, Lizzie's fancy returned to the cool shrubberies, the velvet lawns at Tangley, to the sweet companionship, the sympathy and guidance of her one devoted friend. Yet she had no right to complain of being shut out of that paradise; she had left it of her own free will; she had refused to go back, or even to make any compromise with the situation, when Aunt Dora came to fetch her.

'What could I do?' she asked herself sometimes. 'To have gone back would have been to lay myself open to the imputation of having only acted a part. I must justify the step I took in

my anger that day. I must show those cruel girls that I can live my own life. I could not go back without forfeiting my self-respect.'

Self-respect. That was the idol she had set up for herself. A stern, exacting deity, which had to be propitiated by the sacrifice of her heart's tenderest feelings, and which gave her very little in return. When the harvest moon glorified the dinginess of Milton Street, when the breath of harvest was in the very air of Tangley, poor Lizzie sat at her bedroom window late into the night, watching the light clouds drifting across the round gold moon, and thinking how the same soft light was shining on Tangley Common, with its far-away glimpses of glittering water, and the calm expanse of stubble and meadow rising and falling in gentle undulations to the base of distant hills.

'I'm afraid I shall have to run away from my work,' she thought, in her despondency, feeling health and energy ebbing day by day, till each day the allotted task became more difficult, the vitiated atmosphere more stifling. 'I shall die if I stay in this horrid town.' And then she thought that if she found herself actually incapable of the career she had planned, she would advertise in the local paper for the situation of national schoolmistress in some quiet village, where she might nurse the sick in her own way, and where health and strength, and the power to work, would come back to her in the pure air and quiet rustic life. But she had not broken down yet, and she meant to struggle on, so long as success seemed possible.

'Only when my strength completely fails will I give up,' she said to herself.

Her relations saw the gradual change in her, and saw that the hospital work was doing her harm. Mrs. Hardman remonstrated vehemently.

'I never did see such nonsense as a young woman turning her back on a comfortable home, where she was quite the lady, to moil and toil in an hospital, bringing home small-poxes and typhold fevers to her family.'

'If you are afraid of that, aunt, I can get a lodging,' answered Lizzie meekly.

'Who said I was afraid?' exclaimed her aunt, somewhat inconsistently. 'I ain't one of that sort, child. I ain't a soft-roed one. But for all that you might find something better to do with your life than mixing poultices and rubbing in linimings. If you must do something for your living, why not join Jess in the dressmaking business? You ought to be tasty, after having lived all your life with gentlefolks: and with her machine you might both do splendid.'

Lizzie did not attempt to explain to her aunt that it was a

philanthropic career, and not mere money-earning upon which she had set her heart, lest that severely practical matron should ridicule the idea.

'I think I have a knack for sick-nursing, aunt,' she said; 'and I'm sure I have no taste for dressmaking.'

'Why, didn't you make the gown you've got on?'

'Yes: but I couldn't sit at work all day as Jessie does. It would drive me mad, I think.'

'That's because you ain't used to it.'

Lizzie went on till nearly the end of her probation. She had worked so well, and had shown herself so skilful and intelligent, that the Lady Superior of the Home to which she wished to be admitted had gladly accepted her services. She was to finish her work in the hospital in a few days, and was to take up her abode in the Home, which was a fine, old-fashioned house, in a dull, old-fashioned street, in that deserted quarter of Blackford where, a hundred years ago, members of Parliament, wealthy bankers, and justices of the peace, had made their abode. The change from the close quarters of Milton Street to the spacious, airy rooms at the Home would be a welcome one, and Lizzie was looking forward to it with pleasure, though she had grown honestly attached to her family, whose good-heartedness went as far as virtue can go to atone for extreme vulgarity.

She was, as it were, on the very threshold of her new life; and she felt proud of having held on through all difficulties, and of having conquered at last, when she went home from the hospital one evening with a racking headache. She had suffered a good deal from headache lately, but this pain in her head was unusually severe. She was half blind with the agony of her throbbing temples, and groped her way along the familiar streets and lanes as if she had been walking in a November fog. Her limbs were so heavy that she could scarcely move them; and it was with the utmost difficulty that she dragged herself to Milton Street, hoping all the time that some stray cab would pass her way so that she could get herself driven home. But no cab appeared. Milton Street was out of the beat of such vehicles, and she was obliged to get home without help.

'Why, Lizzie, child, you look that bad!' cried Mrs. Hardman, who was sitting on her favourite stool, reading one of those thrilling serials which beguiled her leisure with lofty fancies. 'You've been looking like a ghost, more or less, for the last fortnight, but you look ever so much worse to-night.'

'I have rather a bad headache,' Lizzie admitted feebly, as she sank upon the ancient horsehair couch which gave to the kitchen something of the luxury of a drawing-room.

'Bilious, I dare say,' said Mrs. Hardman. 'Have a cockle?'

'No, thank you, aunt.'

'Have a cup of tea, then. I stood the pot on the oven top a purpose for you, and there's a nice bit of cake in the oven.'

'I couldn't take anything, aunt, not even tea. I think I'll go to bed.'

She rose to leave the room, but staggered, and would have fallen but for her aunt's aid. Mrs. Hardman assisted her upstairs and put her to bed as if she had been a little child; and when Polly's young man came in presently he was sent straight off for the hospital doctor, who had been most concerned in Lizzie's work.

He came that evening, and the next day, and on many days and evenings, during which Lizzie lay helpless and prostrate, in the stuffy little bedroom where the sewing-machine pursued its noisy career, and where Jessie divided herself between her duties as nurse and dressmaker.

Happily for the family in Milton Street, it was neither small-pox nor typhoid which had stricken poor Lizzie. It was none of those fatal scourges at whose name poor humanity trembles. The girl had only broken down under a strain which she was unable to bear. With depressed spirits and desponding soul she had tried to do work which required all the vigour and vivacity of a happy nature and a hopeful mind; and she had fallen under a burden too heavy for her weakness.

Those distracting thoughts about Tangley—that unconquerable longing for the home she had left—had affected her as the love of country affects a Swiss peasant. She had sickened for the lost home, and was nigh to death.

She had been feverish in the early part of her illness, but never out of her senses; and when Mrs. Hardman suggested that Jessie should write and tell Miss Blake of her sister's illness, Lizzie entreated that no such letter might be written.

'The doctor does not say that I'm in any danger, does he?' she asked.

'Lord, no, my dear,' answered her aunt energetically. 'No fear of that. You're very low, and he says it'll take you a long time to get round, and that you'll never be strong enough for this sick-nursing fad of yours. It is not within the compass of your constitution, he says, so you'd better give that up at once.'

'Yes, I fear I must give it up—just as I had learned the work, and was going to begin my career. It is very hard. I shall try and get a situation in a village school. I have done a good deal of teaching at Tangley, and I know what the work is.'

'Don't you bother about schools nor nothing, till you're strong. Here's our Poll wants to be married early next month and for you to go with her and Jim to the seaside for their honeymoon. He'll only be able to get a week's holiday; but

you can get a good mouthful of sea air in a week, and it will do you a world of good.'

'It is very kind of Polly, but she ought not to be burdened with an invalid sister during her honeymoon.'

'She won't think you no burden. Ain't she your own sister? Blood's thicker than water, you know.'

'I think I had better go somewhere with Jessie, if I am obliged to have change of air,' said Lizzie, with a faint sigh.

She was wondering how long her little stock of money would hold out, and whether she could afford the luxury of a seaside trip with Jessie. She had insisted upon paying Mrs. Hardman a pound a week for her maintenance; although that hospitable matron would willingly have fed and lodged her gratis. She had spent a little money in fees at the hospital, and the five-and-twenty pounds with which she had left Tangley were reduced by about half. And now she was having strong beef tea and other things which must cost money, and it would be her duty to pay Mrs. Hardman more than a pound a week for this period of illness.

'I'm afraid you are spending a great deal of money for me,' she said, one day when her aunt brought her a glass of public-house port, which was both sweet and fiery, and tasted like elderberry wine enriched with the juice of a damson tart.

'You've no call to worry about that, child. Your uncle ain't so poor that he can't afford a bottle of good old port for his niece. I dare say if you'd let me write to Miss Blake she'd send you an 'amper of chice wine. But you must have your own way.'

'Thank you, dear aunt. I'd rather be under an obligation to you than to Miss Blake, dearly as I love her. When I left Tangley I made up my mind to fight the battle of life without any help from rich friends.'

Lizzie was nearly three weeks confined to her bed, and when she was strong enough to get up again and lie on the sofa in the parlour, she looked like the shadow of her former self. It was useless to think of taking a situation yet awhile; it would be a week or two before she could be strong enough for the change of air which the doctor declared indispensable to her recovery. She could only lie on her sofa and read a little, and think a great deal, and look forward wonderingly to a future that was wrapped in shadow.

And now August was nearly ended, and the Blackford election was in full progress. The great, busy, overgrown town was in a state of profound excitement, a fever which penetrated even as far as quiet Milton Street. Party feeling ran high, and there was a kind of infection of opinion in the air which people caught unawares. Men and women who had no political opinions at any other time became suddenly vehement and even angry partisans. Costermongers who herded in the vilest slums

of the town declared themselves good old Tories, and proclaimed their intention of shedding their blood, if needful, for Church and State and a hereditary peerage. The virulent Radical and the hardened Conservative met on the common ground of the public-house and the chandler's shop. Women paused at their wash-tubs with arms akimbo to give utterance to their views as to how the country should be governed. Men who had never invested a five pound note aired their theories about national defiance. Everybody concurred in the one leading idea that the country was going to ruin, and that a total change was required in all existing institutions.

Lizzie, sitting in an arm-chair by the open window of the Milton Street parlour, too weak to venture out of doors, was dependent upon her kindred and the newspapers for all information about the election. But her interest in its progress was intense. She had read every line of the reports of meetings held here and there, by this party or that. She read all Morton's speeches twice over, weighing their effect upon his hearers. She read all that had been said by the rival candidate, in order that she might be able to estimate the strength of Morton's opponent. Her brother William brought her tidings of how things were going. He was able to tell her how the current of popular opinion was setting, and what chance Morton had.

'I think he'll get in,' said William, who was an advanced Liberal.

But Polly's young man was a staunch Conservative, attached to the old-established Tory paper, which had begun its career fifty years ago as a sixpenny weekly, and had reluctantly transformed itself into a penny daily when Mr. Gladstone abolished the paper duty. Polly's young man opined that Morton had a very poor chance. He would not give a twenty-pound note for his chance.

'And though there's no such thing as bribery now-a-days, his election will cost him a pot of money,' said the printer's reader.

'I don't think he'll care about the money,' answered Lizzie, with a sigh.

'Is he so monstrously rich?'

'I believe he has three or four thousand a year, and he is not particularly fond of money.'

'Egad, I shouldn't mind spending a thousand or two if I had such an income as that to fall back upon. But I believe his election will cost him three or four thousand. I heard that his agent said he would have his own way and do things as he likes this time—that it was Mr. Blake's folly in setting his face against treating and such like that lost his election at Highclere last winter.'

'Do you know where Mr. Blake is staying?' asked Lizzie.

'Oh, at the Royal, of course. These men of the people always put up at the best hotel, and live on the fat of the land.'

'If you knew Mr. Blake as well as I do, you would know how little he cares about the fat of the land,' said Lizzie, with a faint smile.

She wondered a little that Morton had not come to see her. He must know from Miss Blake where she was living, and it would have cost him very little trouble to put himself into a cab and be driven to Milton Street. To see him only for a few minutes, to hear how his work was prospering, and to hear from his own lips that he was interested in her new life, would have been very sweet to her. Was it not rather unkind of him who had called himself her adopted brother to be so near and yet not come to see her—more especially when she was so interested in his political career, and when it had been in some measure through her persuasion that he had allowed himself to be nominated for Blackford.

'Perhaps he is offended with me for leaving Tangley just when I was beginning to be useful to him,' she thought; 'or perhaps those cruel girls have said something that has set him against me altogether. Oh, if they were to make him believe that when I was his nurse and amanuensis I was trying to catch him for a husband, how he would despise me! how I should loathe my life if I knew there was such an idea in his mind!'

The fancy that this was possible tormented her cruelly during those eventful days of the election. It was better, perhaps, she argued with herself, that she should not see Morton—better for her own peace, since it must be the chief effort of her mind to forget how dear he had been to her; yet it was unkind of him not to come; and it was unlike Morton to be unkind.

And now came the decisive day on which the result of the balloting was to be made known. Every vehicle in Blackford had been brought into use for the occasion, and the tag-rag and bobtail of the place were disporting themselves in coaches. Flags were flying, drums beating, the joy-bells of half a dozen churches pealing with distracting vivacity. To Lizzie, sitting by the window, with her weary head supported by pillows, and an unread novel lying in her lap, this day seemed the longest in her life. Mrs. Hardman was the only member of the family who made any pretence of staying at home; and even she spent half the day gossiping at the little general shop over the way, or at the milkman's round the corner. The clamour of the bells was almost maddening. Were they ringing in Morton or his opponent? They would peal just as joyously for one as for the other.

'I hope he will not be disappointed a second time,' thought Lizzie. 'He has had so much sorrow within the last year.'

The polling-place was a long way from Milton Street. Mrs.

Hardman brought in stray scraps of intelligence, but they were of a totally irrelevant character, and were of no use to Lizzie; —how much Morton's opponent was supposed to have spent upon bribing one particular foundry; how he had given his bespeak to the theatre, and Mr. Montmorency was to act Claude Melnock, with a new Pauline brought expressly from the Surrey Theayter, London, for the occasion. Lizzie longed for her brother's return from work. He would know the result of the election. She languished for a visit from Polly's young man, even though he was politically unfriendly to Morton. But there was no hope of either of them appearing before seven o'clock. And the long, blank day, with its clamour of church bells, hung heavily on Lizzie's dejected soul.

At five Mrs. Hardman brought some tea and thin bread and butter, with a small plate of watercresses, all neatly and daintily arranged to tempt an invalid.

'How good you are to me, aunt!' said Lizzie, looking up at her gratefully.

'My dear, I do my best, but this must seem a poor place to you after that there Manor 'ouse. You didn't ought to have come away. And to see the wreck you are. It's enough to make anybody cry to look at you. You look ten years older than you did the night you came from the country; and that pinched and 'aggard—I can't think what you've done with your good looks.'

This was meant kindly, but it was not comforting. Vanity had never been Lizzie's vice, and she was able to smile at her aunt's speech.

'My looks won't matter when I am a national school teacher, aunt; and perhaps I may get on all the better if people think me older than I am.'

'Perhaps you will, my dear. You've set your heart on a queer kind of life; and it's no use trying to argue you out of your fancy. All I can say is that if Providence had given me good friends and a good 'ome I shouldn't have took and run away from them. I should have put my pride in my pocket.'

'You know the old proverb, aunt. No one but the person who has to wear it can tell you where the shoe pinches.'

'That's true, child. I suppose your shoe pinched somewheres. But never mind now. Take your tea like a dear.'

Refreshed by her first cup of tea, Lizzie rose from her chair and went over to the chimney-piece to look at her reflection in the cheap glass above it. She wanted to see if she were indeed as much changed as her aunt said she was—if she had lost all pretension to good looks.

Yes, Mrs. Hardman was quite right. All the brightness and freshness was gone from her face. Pinched cheeks, hollow

eyes, a pallid complexion, were reflected in the looking glass—no flatterer at the best of times.

'Perhaps I ought to be glad that Morton did not come to see me,' she said to herself. 'He would have been disgusted at my altered looks. And what would he have thought of this poor little room, with its cheap, vulgar furniture, and the afternoon sun glaring in upon it, after the shady drawing-room at Tangley? Yes, it is better for me that he has kept aloof. I have gone out of his life for ever. Anything that took my mind back to the past would make me more miserable than I am.'

She closed her eyes, exhausted by the long, anxious day, her brain addled by that continual ringing of bells. She let her head fall back upon the pillow, and sank into a gentle doze, soothed by the warmth of the western sun. It was the most refreshing sleep she had enjoyed for a long time, and a slumber in which her fancies wandered away from Blackford into the rural scenery of her past life. She seemed to have been sleeping for a long while—to have lived a lifetime in dreamland, when the sudden opening of the door awoke her, and she started up, flushed with sleep, exclaiming, 'Is he elected, William? Is Mr. Blake elected?'

Her back was turned to the door, but it was near the usual hour of her brother's coming home, and she had no doubt that it was he.

'Yes,' answered a voice just behind her chair, 'Morton Blake is member for Blackford, and he has come to tell you of a success which he owes in a great measure to you.'

It was Morton's voice. Morton, not ungrateful or forgetful, was standing beside her. She rose to her feet, but in her surprise and agitation was too weak to stand, and fell back in her chair half fainting.

'Good heavens! how changed you are!' cried Morton, leaning over her, and supporting her head with his arm. 'The person who opened the door to me just now told me you had been ill—but I had no idea it was so serious. You must have been very ill, Lizzie,'

'Yes, I have been very ill.'

'Dangerously ill. And you never let me know.'

'There was no danger. I was only weak and worn out. I had been working too hard, I suppose. I had my idea of a useful career, just as you have, you see, Morton; only I broke down at the very beginning. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak. And now I have chalked out an humbler path for myself.'

'Oh, you still hold to your idea of a useful career, do you?' he asked, smiling at her with unspeakable tenderness. 'My poor Lizzie—so weak, and wan, and pale. Never mind, dear. Tangley

and Aunt Dora will soon bring the roses back to your cheeks—the happy light to your eyes.'

'You are very good, but I am not going to Tangley. I shall go into the country with my sister, and get strong and well, and then I shall begin my new life, far away from Tangley.'

'You will. You have a finely developed organ of firmness, Lizzie. Take care that unfeminine virtue does not degenerate into the vice of obstinacy.'

'I would rather be obstinate than weak and wavering.'

'Yes, and you are seriously ill—you have had a long illness in this small house—where so little can be done for you,—and you keep your old friends in ignorance of your state. That was very cruel, Lizzie.'

'All was done for me that affection could do. When I left Tangley I made up my mind to break altogether with the old life in which I had been so happy. Half-measures would not do. I must make a new beginning, and accept life as Matthew Hardman's granddaughter.'

'Why this sudden resolution? Why did you leave Tangley?'

'I can never tell you that.'

'Suppose I have found it all out for myself? I think I have, Lizzie. You say you would rather be obstinate than weak; yet you were weak enough to abandon your natural and proper home because two foolish, underbred girls took it into their heads to be jealous of you.'

'I only did what self-respect obliged me to do'

'Very well, we will say no more about that. You are coming back to Tangley to-morrow. Aunt Dora is coming to fetch you.'

'I have refused to go back, even for her sake.'

'Simply because you have been insulted by my sisters. You need fear no further annoyance from them. They are now at the sea-side; and they are never coming back to the Manor House, except as visitors. They have taken a pretty little villa on the outskirts of Highclere—the Laurels, perhaps you remember it,—and they have engaged a duenna. I believe I am to give them a new pony-carriage, and to furnish their house. I think I committed myself so far. So you see, Lizzie, there is no impediment to your return.'

'You are very, very kind,' answered Lizzie, full of thought, 'but I have set my heart upon a useful career.'

'Where could you be more useful than at Tangley?'

'I am so surprised at your sisters leaving you. Did they go of their own accord?'

'Not quite. It was I who proposed the Laurels as a suitable home for them, close to Highclere, so much more lively than Tangley Common. I told them that, as I was going to be

married, they might find their position at the Manor House rather less independent than it had been.'

Lizzie looked a little startled by this announcement. Her pallid cheeks had flushed as she talked to Morton, but the feverish tinge faded out now, and left her deadly white.

'You will come home, Lizzie,' said Morton affectionately. 'You will not consider my wife an impediment, I hope?'

For the moment she was unable to answer him. Her lips trembled, but gave no sound.

'Is it Dulcie?' she asked faintly, after a pause.

'No, Dulcie has found happiness elsewhere. She is going to marry Mr. Haldimond.'

'I am glad of that, for I believe Mr. Haldimond is a good man. But who is it that you are going to marry? Yes, I know. It is Lady Frances.'

'What a brilliant idea! Do you think she would have me if I asked her?'

'I don't know. I can't venture to say,' faltered Lizzie.

'Don't you think our tastes are out of harmony! She is so fond of field sports, and I don't care a straw for them. Then her penmanship is horrible, the veriest flies' legs. And if I wanted to dictate a pamphlet she would never have patience to write for me. No, Lizzie, I don't think Fanny Grange would be a happy woman as my wife, or that I should be altogether blessed as her husband. A man's wife should be really and truly a helpmeet to him, able to sympathize with him in all that is best and holiest in his life, to lead him upward and not downward. But we'll talk more of this by-and-by. I want you to promise to come back to Tangley to-morrow, if you can bear the journey.'

'I shall never go to Tangley again. I thank you with all my heart for your goodness in asking me to return, but I know that I shall be happier in the active life that I have planned for myself. My mind is quite made up.'

'Then you are a cruel girl, and you will make to-day's triumph gall and wormwood to me. Do you know why I have kept aloof from you so long, Lizzie? I waited till I had won my election. I thought you would be proud of my success—the success in which you have had so great a part; for without your sympathy I should have given up all idea of getting into Parliament for the next ten years, after my defeat at Highclere—and I wanted to come to you directly after my election. Here I am, and you are going to spoil everything by being disagreeable.'

'I am not disagreeable, Morton. I am only reasonable. Your wife will not want me at Tangley. To you I may be like a sister, but I should be a stranger to her; and before long she would begin to think of me as an intruder. It would be hard

for me to find myself humiliated by her, as I have been humiliated by your sisters, and to have to turn my back upon that dear place a second time.'

'Very well, Lizzie, if you refuse to make Tangley your future home you will place me in a very awkward dilemma with my sisters.'

'How so?'

'Because I have told them that I am going to marry, and you are the only wife I will ever take home to Tangley.'

'Morton!'

'You left my house because you were insulted in it. You must come back as its mistress.'

'Morton, you are laughing at me.'

'I was never so much in earnest in my life. I have lived for nearly two months without you, and the time has been long enough to teach me that you are necessary to my happiness. Your friendship first cured me of the old love. Your many virtues and sweet, unconscious charms taught me a new love. It is for you to make it a happy one. I shall never regret anything I have lost in life if I can but win you.'

'Morton, I am so unworthy of you—a penniless dependent, owing everything to your aunt's charity. Just look round this room, and remember that the only relations I have in the world live in it; or rather do not live in it, for they think it too good for daily use. Remember that they are ignorant people, good, and kind, and true-hearted, but vulgar in all their habits and ideas. I am not ashamed of them, because I belong to them; but what would you feel if my uncle and aunt were to come to Tangley Manor to see their niece, or if my brother and sisters expected to be received by me? And once having come back to them, and been cared for by them, I can't go away and turn my back upon them for ever, don't you see, Morton.'

'I do see, I do understand, dearest. And your brother and sisters and uncle and aunt shall be welcome at Tangley Manor whenever they may please to come. Do you think I am so base a hound that I can profess a regard for the working classes and their interests, and yet blush to own that my grandfather and my wife's grandfather were working men? Fortune favoured my grandfather and he climbed to the top of the ladder, while your grandfather—who must have been an honest man, or mine would not have loved him so well—stayed at the bottom. The only difference between your pedigree and mine is success; and you shall share the fortune that success brought, darling, if you will—if you only will.'

'Oh, Morton, I have loved you ever since I was a child. I wish you were a pauper, that you might know how true my love is.'

'But I don't, Lizzie. I'll take your love upon trust. And now may I call your aunt in and tell her? She looked very suspicious just now when I asked to see you. I shouldn't wonder if she were listening at the door.'

'Oh, Morton!'

'Don't be shocked, dear. A duchess might do as much on such an occasion.'

'Morton, I'm afraid you will be disgusted with them. They talk in a dreadfully vulgar style, but they are very good.'

'Never mind their talk, dear. Your brother and sisters are not too old to learn a better style. We'll get them polished a little, just to make you happy.'

He opened the door in a leisurely way, and found Mrs. Hardman in the kitchen, looking out of the window with an abstracted air, her arms folded on the window-sill, her voice uplifted in a popular melody; by all which signs and tokens he concluded that she had been listening. William and his sister Jessie were both at home. Mary was out with her young man; and it is to be observed that a young woman engaged to a young man is rarely to be found in the domestic circle.

'It was very cruel of you not to let me know that Lizzie was so ill,' said Morton, when he had been introduced to the family.

'It was all her fault,' answered Mrs. Hardman. 'She was so set against my writing that I didn't dare to do it for fear she should fret and make herself worse. But it laid heavy on my conscience, I can tell you. Ain't she a wreck?'

'She is looking very ill; but my aunt will be here to-morrow, and I shall send them both off to Scarborough for a month; and then there will be a wedding, and you must be bridesmaid, Miss Hardman.'

Jessie clasped her hands, and gave a hoydenish jump, in the exuberance of her delight.

'Didn't I say there was a lover at the bottom of it all?' exclaimed Mrs. Hardman. 'Well, Mr. Blake, I wish you joy, and I think, though Lizzie's a lucky girl in getting such a husband, you're a lucky man in getting such a wife; for though I says it that shouldn't, there never was a sweeter young woman than my niece, sir. And now I suppose we shall see no more of her. She'll never come to Milton Street no more after she's married.'

'Indeed she will, Mrs. Hardman,' answered Morton heartily. 'She shall come to see you, wherever you are, and you must come to see her.'

'No, thank you, sir,' said the matron, bridling, 'it's very kind of you to mention it, but I know when I'm in my element. I'm very fond of Liz, but I shouldn't feel easy in a fine house; and

I'll never go where I ain't in my own element. That's the only kind of pride I've got left in me. I know my element, and I like to keep in it.'

'I think we could make you comfortable at Tangley,' said Morton, smiling.

'Yes, if I could come and help to cook a great dinner, or give a hand in your spring cleaning, and sit down to my meals free and easy with your servants. But you and Lizzie wouldn't like that. And as to sitting on a satin-covered chair, and twiddling my thumbs, I couldn't do it for no one.'

'Well, I hope you'll change your mind when you come to know us better. Lizzie's brother and sisters must come and see what kind of place Tangley is, and then they may be able to tempt you.'

'I'll come, and glad,' said Jessie, 'for I think Liz is too good a sort to be ashamed of me.'

Morton winced a little at hearing his betrothed described as a good sort; but he came through the whole ordeal nobly; and he sat down by-and-by to a sumptuous spread of tea, hot cakes, watercresses, and shrimps, in the bosom of his new family.

CHAPTER LII.

THICKER THAN WATER.

It was September, and the harvest was nearly over in the fields round Austhorpe—a peerless September morning, sweet to the sportsman lightly treading the stubble with a brace of flop-eared setters bounding before him; sweet to the village truant climbing the briary bank where the blackberries were ripening in the autumn sun; but sweeter still to Arthur Haldimond; for this fair September morning was to be his wedding day, and in the soft light of the harvest moon Dulcie and he were to be crossing the Channel, on the first stage of their journey to the Tyrol; with which romantic region Mr. Haldimond had made himself familiar years ago, when he was an undergraduate, with ample leisure and well-filled purse, roaming the Continent in quest of some quiet nook for study.

It was to be a very simple wedding. Miss Courtenay's engagement had been told to only a few people, but those few had not been so silent as they ought to have been about the secret confided to them, and the little world of Austhorpe had grown familiar with the fact even before the banns were read in the village church. Every one wanted to be asked to the wedding, and Sir Everard received many intimations direct and indirect

to that effect; but he pleaded his own precarious health, and the bridegroom's profession, as reasons for a quiet wedding.

'I could not stand the excitement of a crowd,' he said, when Mrs. Aspinall remonstrated with him on his cruelty to the neighbourhood, 'and Haldimond hates the idea of a fuss.'

'But Dulcie,' screamed Mrs. Aspinall, 'you have to think of Dulcie. Dulcie ought not to be cheated out of the one great triumph of a pretty girl's existence—a stylish wedding.'

'Dulcie does not wish for a stylish wedding. You forget that her situation is somewhat delicate. A few months ago she was engaged to Morton Blake.'

'Ah,' sighed Mrs. Aspinall, 'that was a sad pity. Your rooted objection to trade, I suppose. Well, a man of your old family would naturally be prejudiced. And Mr. Haldimond is very nice—remarkably nice. I have not a word to say against him. I suppose *I* may come to the wedding, having known your dear child ever since she was a tiny thing?'

'We shall be delighted to have your company, if you will not be bored by a humdrum wedding.'

'Humdrum! As if Dulcie's wedding could be humdrum to me. You do not know the interest I have felt in that sweet girl,' sighed Mrs. Aspinall, thinking how fondly she had hoped to have the sweet girl for a step-daughter, and how little chance there was of that hope being realized.

'You will come, then. Lord Blatchmardean and his son will be with us. Lady Frances will be Dulcie's bridesmaid.'

'Only one bridesmaid?'

'Yes, but that bridesmaid is her bosom friend—the girl who has been a sister to her in her trouble. Don't you think it is better to have one such bridesmaid than ten foolish virgins who care a great deal less for the bride than for the fine gowns they wear at her wedding?'

'True,' assented Mrs. Aspinall. 'Fanny Grange is very real—rather rough and masculine in her ways, not my ideal girl—but very staunch. I used to think she was in love with Morton, and that it would be a very nice thing if those two were to make a match of it, for poor Lord Blatchmardean hasn't sixpence to give his daughter, you know—but when I sounded her the other day she told me plainly that she doesn't care a straw for him. She admitted that in their old boy and girl days, when he was a lad at Rugby and she a child in short petticoats, she had been awfully fond of him; but it has all worn off, it seems. I suppose Dulcie's engagement cured her. She would hardly like the reversion of a heart; though, as for that, a girl in her circumstances ought not to be particular.'

And now the wedding day had come, and Dulcie, simply dressed in her dove-coloured travelling gown, with a dove-

coloured straw hat, and just one sprig of orange blossom pinned among the soft folds of her old Mechlin fichu, walked through the fields to church, leaning on her father's arm. Lord Blatchmardean followed with Mrs. Aspinall, who had a new gown from Worth for the occasion, determined to shoot one final arrow at the mark she had so often tried to hit, Sir Everard's marble heart. The gown was an elaborate combination of velvet and silk, of the last new colour, bottle-glass, and would be useful for winter wear; and in this bottle-glass gown, with a bottle-glass bonnet and feather, and ten-buttoned Sweedish gloves, Mrs. Aspinall felt herself above criticism. Dulcie had insisted that if Mrs. Aspinall came to the wedding, Miss Pawker should be asked too, so the useful Louisa was there, looking really fashionable, in a cast-off gown of her patroness which had been done up for the occasion. Lady Frances wore a kind of glorified lawn tennis costume of soft white cashmere and scarlet velvet, with a scarlet toque perched coquettishly upon her curly black hair, and a cluster of scarlet geraniums and stephanotis pinned on her shoulder—a costume which Beville approved in his own vernacular as 'a fetching get-up.'

Poor Beville, with Miss Pawker leaning on his arm, looked like a victim being led to the sacrifice. To have to assist at the wedding of the one woman who could have made his life happy was a sore trial. That one other woman who was destined to be his consoler had not yet appeared on life's horizon: but that, for a man of Beville's temperament, there would be such woman nobody in his senses could doubt.

The bishop of the diocese was Arthur Haldimond's bosom friend. He had been in charge of an important parish during the earlier part of Mr. Haldimond's ministry in Whitechapel, and the two men had seen much of each other. They had the same views, the same opinions, the same broad and liberal cast of mind and character; and the happy turn of events which had raised the vicar to the episcopal bench had in no wise weakened the tie between them. When the bishop heard that his friend was going to be married he at once declared his intention of tying the knot.

'This redeems the whole thing,' said Mrs. Aspinall, with a reverent glance at his lordship's lawn sleeves, 'and after all there is a quiet elegance in a wedding of this kind, which your hurly-burly marriages at St. George's can never attain.'

The bare old church was decked with flowers—flowers from hothouses, and flowers from cottage gardens. Every wreath had been woven, every cluster arranged, by hands that worked with loving zeal. The whole thing had been done in one afternoon, as if by magic. And when the ceremonial was over, and the schoolmistress was making as much noise as the harmonium was

capable of, in the swelling chords of Mendelssohn's Wedding March, Dulcie and her husband walked along a path of thickly-strewn blossoms that had been sought for far and wide, in wood and field—harebells and purple heath-bloom, and all the family of autumn flowers.

Sir Everard gave his arm to Lady Frances when they left the church, while Mrs. Aspinall, who had had quite enough of Lord Blatchmardean and his disquisition on the last improvement in hay-saving machinery, impounded the bishop, leaving the earl to follow with his son. The newly married pair were to drive straight from the church gate to Highclere station, where they would arrive just in time to catch the one o'clock express for London, thus escaping the horrors of a wedding breakfast.

'Father,' said Dulcie, clinging to Sir Everard in the farewell at the gate, 'when shall we see you again?'

'Next winter, perhaps, my pet. If your husband will bring you to Algiers.'

'Of course he will take me.—You will take me to see papa, won't you, Arthur? That is a promise.'

'Was it you or I who promised just now to obey?' asked her husband, smiling down at the sweet uplifted face. 'I know which of us will have to do it. Yes, dear, you shall be taken to Algiers. If you ordered me to take you to the moon I should have to set about the journey somehow, though I might feel sure of breaking down.'

'It is not a joke, sir, I am very much in earnest. Wherever papa spends the winter I must go to see him.'

'Dear love, it shall be so, God helping us,' answered Mr. Haldimond, very much in earnest this time.

Then came the last clinging embrace between father and daughter, a little hand given to the friends who clustered at the gate. And then Dulcie stepped lightly to her place in the barouche, her husband seated himself by her side, the villagers, men, women, and children, set up a hearty cheer, and the carriage rolled away in a cloud of sunlit dust, that encircled it like a nimbus.

'What shall I do without her?' sighed Sir Everard. 'But thank God she is happy.'

The little party, *minus* bride and bridegroom, went back to Fairview, to eat lobster salad and Périgord pie, and drink to the wedded lovers in sparkling wines. Sir Everard tried his hardest to seem gayer than he was wont to be; but Frances Grange, who had learned how to read his face, could see that his heart was heavy. Mrs. Aspinall, confident in the success of her bottle-glass gown, and of that new hair-dye which was ever so much more natural than the last, provided vivacity and spirits for the whole party, cheering Sir Everard with sympathetic ogles,

and openly coquetting with the bishop. Sparkling wines at an unusual hour had opened the sluices of Mrs. Aspinall's eloquence, and she talked enough for everybody, surveying the party with a superior smile, as if she could not help admitting to herself that they were all very stupid, and that she was the life of the assembly.

She talked of herself chiefly, of her early married life, and the royal personages and diplomatic celebrities with whom she had been on intimate terms during her wanderings on the Continent.

'We had a delicious villa at Posilipo, and received all the best people in Naples. Poor Bomba and I were like brother and sister. He used to tell me all his plans, and he really had a very noble mind—a noble mind. I have always hated Garibaldi, and all that nonsense about the unification of Italy. The country has been going down ever since the Bourbons left it. And the Queen was very sweet. Yes, we spent some happy days at Posilipo.'

Mrs. Aspinall sighed, and allowed Scroope to fill her glass with dry champagne. It was about the seventh time the glass had been filled, conscientiously, and the dowager was beginning to wander a little.

'Dear Holly Hill,' she exclaimed, with a maudlin air. 'Bishop, you know the south of Ireland?'

She accompanied the remark with a playful tap of her fan upon the episcopal knuckles, and she smiled a melting smile.

'Yes, madam, I have enjoyed some very pleasant days in the south of Ireland. A fine hospitable race, your southern Irish.'

'I am so glad you like them,' said Mrs. Aspinall. 'I don't often talk of my old home, but I dearly love the memory of it. Dear Holly Hill, looking down on the beautiful river. I was born there, my brothers and sisters were born there.' Moved by these touching memories, the lady began to sing, in a voice which time had slightly cracked,—

> 'Ye bells of Shandon, that sound so grand on
> The pleasant waters of the river Lee.'

'Arrah, thin, darlin'. I'm glad ye've not forgotten the ould counthry,' exclaimed a rich Irish voice at the window; and Mrs. Aspinall and all the company beheld a stout, red-haired, florid, middle-aged gentleman looking in at them.

'Who is that?' faltered the mistress of Aspinall Towers, staring at the intruder through her binoculars. 'I don't think I know him.'

'Bedad an' ye do, me dear, ye know your brother Pat, though it's ten years since ye've laid eyes on him. Faith, I'll come round by the door, and tell ye all about me journey to England, and how

I tuk it into my head to come down to Daleshire before I went back to Holyhead, if the masther of the house will excuse me makin' so free.'

'Pray come in and join us,' said Sir Everard, smiling. 'Scroope, bring the gentleman round.'

'My name's Ryan, surr—Pat Ryan,—though my own sister don't take the throuble to introjooce me,' said the stranger, with a crushing look at Mrs. Aspinall.

He disappeared from the window, and was ushered in by Scroope. 'Good mornin' to ye, ladees an' gintlemen—your servant,' he said, with a comprehensive bow, and then he walked over to Mrs. Aspinall, and gave her a brotherly kiss, a loud smack, which was altogether the most vulgar thing in kisses. His sister writhed under the infliction.

'You shouldn't have intruded yourself upon my friends, Patrick,' she said severely. 'I am very glad to see you, of course; but you should have waited at the Towers till I got home.'

'Why thin, shure, if I'd waited there till you got home, I'd have had to go away widout seein' ye. I must be back at Highclere by foive o'clock to catch the train for Chester. You moight take it more koindly, my comin', if you knew the throuble it cost me—an' a business like mine, that can't be neglected. I asked your fine paycock of a futman where ye'd gone, and when he tould me ye was at a weddin' breakfast, I ses, then I'll be afther followin' her. Wan gob more or less at a weddin' breakfast makes no differ. The more the merrier. There's always lashins and lavins.'

Mrs. Aspinall looked as if she was going into hysterics. 'Lashins and lavins!' and this red-haired, florid man, who reeked with vulgarity, and talked the broadest Irish, was her very brother. There was nothing to be gained by denying the relationship; he would have laughed her to scorn. She had kept him at a distance for fifteen years by all manner of diplomatic devices; and now when she was declined into the vale of years, and was less able to cope with him, he came down upon her like an avalanche. She could have lifted up her voice and wept; but she felt that she must face the situation, and she faced it with a sickly smile.

'My brother is a thorough Milesian,' she said, with a deprecating glance, first at her host and then at the bishop. Beville and his sister were choking with laughter behind their handkerchiefs; but the elder members of the party were preternaturally grave. 'He has hardly ever left his native country.'

'Oh, devil a lie in it! faix, gintlemen, when a man kills more pigs than any other dayler in Cork he'd not be afther roamin' about the world for sport. I like to stand in my own

stall, and see that the mate gets properly handled, and now here's Chicago takin' the bread out of our mouths with its machine-killed pork. Ye just stand your grunter on a thrap, ye see, sir, and turn a handle, and he falls through and gets his throat cut widout knowin' anything about it, and in so many seconds he's singed and dressed, and ready for shippin'. Who's to stand agen such a thrade as that, I'd loike to know, unless he do be sticking close to his own counter? There ain't a better business than mine in Cork, and though I'm no self-made man, for I'd a father before me, I'm proud to think I've doubled and thribled the trade since the ould gintleman shifted his sticks to a better world. Bedad, 'tis a great change, entirely, from the days that play-boy Tim Daly crissened me "Pigs is rus." Bad scran to them, 'tis fallin' they are now widout no machinery at all, at all.'

Scroope had placed a plate and knife and fork before the new-comer, and had filled his glass with champagne. He now offered the stranger a pâté de foie gras, which had been only slightly dipped into.

'What'll this be now?' asked the pork butcher, with a puzzled air of appeal to the company generally. 'It looks uncommon nasty.'

'Strasburg pie, Patrick. It is excellent,' said Mrs. Aspinall, looking daggers at the unconscious offender.

'Thank ye kindly, my man, but I'd rather lave it alone,' said Patrick, looking up at the butler. 'There's too much hog's lard about it for my taste. I never ate what I don't understand. I'll trouble yez for a slice of that ham of bacon there. He looks mighty well for an English ham.'

Mr. Ryan ate a plate of ham and drank a good many glasses of Clicquot with hearty relish. He made himself quite at home, and told the company a good deal about himself and his sister. How their father had begun life in a very small way as a general dealer in a by-street of Cork; how he had pushed his trade till he made a big business in pork and Irish butter. How they had been brought up at an elegant country seat called Holly Hill, which the pork butcher had built for himself. How Calphurnia had been sent to a genteel boarding school, and no money spared on her education.

'Whereby you may fancy the mortification it was to the poor ould father when she married a stuck-up spalpeen of an honourable nobody who happened to be quartered at Cork with his rigiment, and then turned her back on the whole bilin' of us, all as wan we wasn't good enough for the gintry, be gor,' concluded Mr. Ryan. 'But she and me made pace when we met permiscuous in London tin year ago, and we've been friends ever since,—haven't us, my darlin'?'

Mrs. Aspinall assured her brother, before the whole assembly that she had always entertained the warmest affection for him.

'And now, Patrick, I must ask you to see me home,' she said blandly. 'It's getting late, and as I shall have to drive you to Highclere——'

'Shure, there's a good half-hour to spare,' replied Mr. Ryan, looking at his watch, and then handing his glass to the butler. 'I'll see the bottom of the bottle.'

'Patrick, you are making your visit an infliction,' cried Mrs. Aspinall indignantly.

'Be aisy now, he don't mind me,' said Patrick, with a friendly glance at his host. ''Tis only yourself that's so moighty particular. Though bedad,' with a wink at Sir Everard, 'ye same to have the advantige of me in that quarter, me lov', for be all appearance ye made pretty free with the fiz before I came.'

Mrs. Aspinall sat down again, pale with anger at this home-thrust,—a pallor that was visible under her artistic red. She could make no further struggle. She could only sit and suffer, and speculate dimly as to whether she would be able to go on living at the Towers after this: whether speedy exile to Florence or Rome would not be inevitable: whether such a hideous exposure could in any wise be lived down.

Mr. Ryan finished his bottle of champagne, making himself as much at home with Sir Everard and the bishop as if he had been used to such company all his life. He was profusely complimentary to the two younger ladies, waxing poetical about Lady Frances Grange's eyes, and quoting Tom Moore's lines, 'To ladies' eyes around, boys, you can't refuse.' He had even a kindly word for Miss Pawker, who thought him one of the nicest men she had ever met; bating a touch of vulgarity which was too distinctly national to be altogether offensive. She was inclined to wish, like Desdemona, that Heaven had made her such a man; and she felt a gentle thrill when Mr. Ryan mentioned incidentally that he was a widower, and on the look-out for a sensible, good-humoured wife, not too young to be a clever housekeeper, nor too old to be pleasing.

He finished his bottle, and then offered his sister his arm to walk back to the Towers. Mrs. Aspinall made the best of her painful position, and smiled blandly as she wished everybody good-bye.

'I am sorry you must leave the neighbourhood so soon, Mr. Ryan,' said the bishop, as the portly pork-butcher grasped his hand.

'If my sister's inclined to be hospitable, me lord, shure, I don't know that I'd mind wasting a week in these parts,' returned Mr. Ryan, with a friendly glance at Louisa, who had impressed him with a strong idea of her common sense; and

common sense was Patrick's favourite virtue in woman, possibly because his late wife had been an arrant fool.

'You know you are welcome at the Towers, Patrick,' said Mrs. Aspinall, with a convulsive smile.

'Faith, I'm be no manes so sure of that,' cried that monster of a brother, with his stentorian laugh, 'but I know I ought to be, for blood's thicker than water, and you and me was always good friends; and didn't I cane Tim Rooney for oglin' you on the parade at Queenstown? Sure and a fine bouncing young woman you was in those days. Divil a bit did I ever expect to see yez shrivelled to such a thrid paper.'

'A rough diamond,' said Mrs. Aspinall to Sir Everard, still blandly smiling, but with the smile that masks mental agony. 'Are you coming, Patrick?'

'I am ready, my dear, but I'd like to tip the butler furrst,' remonstrated Patrick, in a loud whisper. 'Thim fellows always expect it on such an occasion as this.'

But Mrs. Aspinall would not wait for the butler to be tipped. She felt that her brother appeared at his worst when compared with the calm and polished Scroope. She dragged him away somehow, breathing a little more freely when she was in the avenue.

'Oh, Patrick, Patrick,' she exclaimed, with a stifled sob, 'what a disgrace you've brought upon me!'

'No, ma'am,' answered the pork butcher, with dignity, 'there's no disgrace of my bringing, for I'm an honest man that has never paid less than twenty shillings in the pound, and has a good chance to be Mayor of Cork before he dies. The disgrace is yours, if you're ashamed of your own flesh and blood. Av I only broke, an' druv a carriage, an' put a cockade in me man's hat, an' paid two shillings in the pound, 'tis proud of me ye'd be. Bedad, I was disgracefully honest.'

CHAPTER LIII.

'THE REST IS SILENCE.'

SIR EVERARD was alone, standing with an absent air in a deserted room where everything—from the open piano to the little heap of daintily bound duodecimos on the table by the sofa—seemed to speak of Dulcie. Lord Blatchmardean and his son and daughter had taken leave immediately after Mrs. Aspinall's departure. The bishop had followed them. The bustle and excitement appertaining to even the quietest wedding were over and done with. Scroope and his man were clearing

the table and carrying off the fine old Georgian tankards and college cups to the pantry, there to be swathed in baize, preparatory to being confined in the gloom of an iron-lined plate-room. The gardeners had left their work, indulged with a holiday in honour of Miss Courtenay's marriage. The village schoolroom was being prepared for a festal tea; the joy-bells were ringing gaily in the old Square Tower. But here at Fairview all was very quiet and lonely.

'How I shall miss her, now and hereafter!' mused Sir Everard, looking round the familiar room. While he was standing thus contemplating the things associated with his daughter's past life almost as if they were living creatures, and could in some wise sympathize with him in his hour of sorrow, the glass door was softly opened, and he heard the silken rustling of a woman's gown creeping towards him as he stood with his back to the door.

He turned suddenly, half expecting to see her whose image so completely filled his thoughts, and yet he knew that she was far away by this time—in London, or on the road to Dover.

It was not Dulcie, but Frances Grange.

'Don't be angry with me for coming back,' she faltered, looking up at him shyly, her colour changing from red to pale as she spoke; 'I wanted so much to know your plans—to say ever so many things—which I was afraid to say before the bishop and Mrs. Aspinall. So when the carriage was half-way to Blatchmardean I told the Sheik I had some business in the village, and left him to go home with Beville. Are you vexed with me for worrying you?'

'Vexed with you for being kind and full of compassion? No, my fair Diana, I am very grateful to you. I was just feeling horribly lonely, and it is a comfort to see some one whom Dulcie loves, to be able to talk of her with her favourite friend.'

'Yes, I think she is fond of me,' said Frances thoughtfully. 'I tried very hard to win her love.'

'And you succeeded in winning it without stint. I can never thank you enough for your goodness. You came to us in the hour of trouble, and brought life and light into our home. God knows how we should have fared without you.'

'I am thankful to think I was of use. I am proud to remember that you trusted me,' answered Frances gravely.

Her colour—that bright carnation which harmonized so perfectly with her nut-brown skin—had not yet come back. She was very pale and full of thought.

'Sit down in my darling's chair,' said Sir Everard. 'You must give me my tea—the last I shall taste in this house.'

'You are going away—at once?'

'To-night. I leave by the mail.'

'And you are not coming back till next spring?'

'No. You see the doctors insist upon my spending the winter in Algiers, and I have my own ideas as to my destination in the spring?'

Frances Grange understood him. There is nothing so quick to understand as a girl's sympathy with a man of graver years, whom she has taken it into her head to worship: and Frances Grange had made Sir Everard her hero. Even the reserve which kept her at a distance, tempered as it was by kindly feeling and an evident appreciation of her charms, gave strength and depth to her regard.

'And you are going away—alone?'

'Quite alone.'

'To be ill, perhaps; in a strange country; without a friend.'

'It is most likely I shall have to bear even that. But I have a capital servant, a fellow as faithful as Byron's Fletcher, a man of considerable education. You need not think of me as altogether miserable. I am content that my life should finish in gloom, now that Dulcie is secure of spending hers in the sunshine of a happy love. I leave Fairview; but my thoughts and my affection will still hover round it, for Dulcie will be here with her husband. It is to be their home when they return from their honeymoon.'

'Sir Everard, I cannot bear to think of your being alone in that strange, remote country. I don't know how to say it, but I feel as if I could be of use to you, a companion to you sometimes, in your hours of weariness, that I might in some poor degree fill your daughter's place. Will you let Beville and me come with you? I can make him do anything I like, dear good fellow. I don't mean for us to be with you always, only to be in the same hotel, or the same town, to be at hand if you wanted sympathy, to nurse you if you were ill. Let us come.'

She looked up at him with tearful eyes, her hands clasped, a child-like, reverent affection in her attitude and expression that smote him to the heart. Oh, had he but been worthy of such a love, could he but have said, 'Be my wife, make the remnant of my days blessed,' he might have gathered one of the fairest flowers that ever bloomed within the reach of a man's hand. Conscience and honour forbade. He only took the clasped hands in both his own, and bent down to kiss the pale forehead.

'My sweetest child, I am unworthy of your goodness. I am unworthy of one thought from you. I am more touched than I can say by this last evidence of your regard. I shall treasure the memory of your sweetness till I am clay. But the home to which I am going will allow of no such fair companionship.

Neither love nor friendship can enter there. Over the door of that dwelling is inscribed, "no woman must enter."'

'I cannot understand,' faltered Frances.

'Dear girl, you will know all in good time. But be sure always that your affection has lent a light to this last hour of my worldly life which will help to brighten my way to the grave. You will be kind to Dulcie, will you not, when I am far away? You will not let new ties blot her out of your mind?'

'Never!' exclaimed Frances, 'I am not likely to make new ties,' with the conviction of a woman who believes she has done with love for ever, because she once loved in vain, 'and Dulcie will be as dear as a sister to me as long as I live. There is no chance of my changing. I only hope she will not change. But you will come back next May, Sir Everard? You will see your daughter happy in her new life. I feel sure that a winter in the south will do wonders for you.'

'I shall never come back to England any more. Do not look so grieved, Frances. I have chosen the path which I know is most likely to lead to peace. Were I to live for twenty years it would be the same. I shall bid farewell to England and all old associations to-morrow morning.'

'I have no right to question your motives or your determination,' said Frances sadly. 'You have been very good to me, and I have spent many happy hours in this house May God give you all blessings, wherever you go. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye, dear child,' he said, and this time he folded her in his arms and kissed her, as he would have kissed Dulcie.

'Frances,' he said, gently and gravely, 'if I had been a good man I should have asked you to be my wife, and then the end of my life might have been very different.'

She looked up at him with the infinite confidence of a woman not over-wise, but unselfishly devoted.

'I can trust you and be happy with you, whatever you are,' she whispered.

'No, love, I would not wrong you so deeply.'

They went out together by the glass door, and along the avenue to the lodge gate, and here they parted for ever. A month later it was known at Austhorpe that Sir Everard Courtenay had turned Romanist, and had joined a Trappist Brotherhood, whose monastery is situated on an elevated plain a few miles from Algiers. Over the door of that monastery appears the inscription, 'No woman must enter here.' Never more upon this earth can Dulcie see her father. His life is of the severest kind. He rises at two every morning to spend silent hours in prayer—he is excused from labour on account of his declining health, for it is known to the fraternity that he has come among them to die. There is an inscription on the wall of

the Refectory which faces the new brother as he sits at the frugal meal, and which he contemplates often with his sad smile: 'Le plaisir de mourir sans peine vaut bien la peine de vivre sans plaisir.'

* * * * *

Dulcie is happy, or as nearly happy as it is given to any mortal with a conscience and a heart to be in this world. She carries about with her always, as a part of her own existence, the memory of her father's sorrow and her father's crime—but before the first year of her wedded life is done the English brother is lying at rest in the grave that he dug for himself, far away under the blue southern sky, and it is an unspeakable comfort to her to know that he confessed his sin, and that his whole after life, from the hour in which he sinned, was one long repentance. She believes that the God who might deal hardly with the hardened sinner will surely deal mercifully with the penitent.

* * * * *

So life goes on peacefully, at a jog-trot pace, at Austhorpe, and Tangley, and Blatchmardean. Morton and his wife are a model couple: and Dora Blake is happier, sitting on the sunny lawn with her nephew's first baby on her lap, than she has ever been since her brother's untimely death. In all Morton's efforts, in all his triumphs, successes, and disappointments, Lizzie goes with him hand in hand: and though she has now been married nearly two years, she has never yet reproached him for not having taken her advice, nor gloried in the discomfiture due to a neglect of her opinion. In Parliament he has been eminently successful; not because he is a genius, but because he has the rare gift of being a thorough workman. He has spoken often and well, has been heard with deference, and is supposed to have done good service to the cause he has at heart. Nor has he ever been less than his word in the consideration which he has shown to his wife's relations. Mr. and Mrs. Hardman have been to Tangley, and have been made much of, and have behaved themselves admirably after their own homely fashion. Mary and Mary's husband have also been entertained at the Manor House; and though the self-opinionated printer has bored his host a little by the arrogant assertion of his adverse opinions, Morton has endured the infliction with laudable patience, for Mary's sake, that worthy young woman looking up to her husband as an oracle whose opinions ought to be the backbone of the *Times* newspaper.

But at Tangley Jessie is the favourite. She has given up her sewing-machine, except as a useful companion for leisure hours, to assist her in making her own gowns, and innumerable garments for the Tangley and Austhorpe poor. She divides her

life between the Manor House and the pretty suburban cottage to which Mr. and Mrs. Hardman have removed the frayed horse-hair sofa, untrustworthy clock, and other household gods; a cottage, the freehold whereof has been presented to Uncle Joseph by his niece Mrs. Blake. There is an acre and a half of paddock attached to the cottage, which it is supposed will be carried along in the march of the ages and eventually converted into building land at ten shillings a foot frontage. Mr. Hardman loves to talk about this paddock as a fine thing for his children when he shall be dead and gone, and to plan the sites of future cottages on the green-sward, as he strolls about his freehold of an evening smoking his pipe. Jessie is quick and bright, and her sister's influence, with the still stronger influence of refined surroundings, has already smoothed away the rough edges of the vulgarity which struck Lizzie so painfully during her stay in Milton Street. Jessie is fond of reading, and Lizzie has persuaded her to read clever books instead of silly ones. She is fond of society, but is modest and diffident in a circle where she feels herself inferior. She thus gives herself time to learn before she commits herself to much speech; and the general opinion round and about Tangley is in favour of Miss Hardman.

Horatia and Clementine get on comfortably enough in their new home. They bully the duenna, and quarrel with each other a good deal, yet are sworn allies, and are held up as an example of devoted sisters. They have put 'At Home Fridays, 4 to 6,' on their visiting cards, and they entertain all the genteel womanhood of Highclere, and within a driveable distance, at the most elegant style of afternoon tea. Everything in their house which is not early English—of the school of Tottenham Court Road—is unquestionably Japanese. They spend a good deal of money on hothouse flowers, and do a great deal of high-art work for charity bazaars. They drive a good deal, visit a good deal, and give all their particular friends to understand, in the strictest confidence, that Morton would have given worlds to retain the light of their presence at the Manor; but that from the moment he began to think of marrying Lizzie Hardman their departure was inevitable.

'And yet we really have no fault to find with Lizzie,' said Horatia, with calm patronage. 'We both liked her immensely —in her place.'

Far away in Boston Mrs. Barnard hears of a legacy which has been left to her by a testator whose name is not to be communicated to her. The legacy is the sum of six thousand pounds in ready money, which is duly paid to Jane Barnard for her own separate use and maintenance, by Messrs. Pherret and Phoolskap, of Lincoln's Inn; and Mrs. Barnard feels very

sure that this gift, which reaches her within three months of Sir Everard Courtenay's death, comes to her from that repentant sinner. The money is immediately invested as a sacred trust for her sons and daughters, and neither she nor her husband will touch a penny of principal or interest.

Mrs. Aspinall has lost her faithful slave, Louisa Pawker—lost her under circumstances which the dowager tearfully declares to have been of exceptional treachery. Louisa is Miss Pawker no longer; for after spending a fortnight at the Towers, and shocking the susceptibilities of his sister in every hour of that fortnight, the jovial pork-butcher proposed to Mrs. Aspinall's companion, and was promptly and cordially accepted; and now Mrs. Patrick Ryan rules over a boisterous brood of step-children, who hang about her with filial love, and is mistress of a smart villa at Passage, whither her husband retires to a hot supper and unlimited grog after the heat and burden of his day in Cork city. The novelty of the position, the change from being ordered to ordering, from the passive to the active voice of the verb, is intoxicating to Louisa. But she is too sensible to lose her head amidst these happier surroundings; or to play the tyrant because she has had to play the slave; or to be extravagant with her husband's ample means because she has had so long to rub through life without any means at all worth speaking of.

Mrs. Aspinall has tried three companions since Louisa's desertion, and they have all three behaved so badly after their divers fashions, that she has now given up the idea of hireling companionship as an impossibility. 'The young woman of the period is utterly unfit to earn her bread anywhere out of the ballet or the refreshment bar,' she informs Frances Grange.

Frances and her brother are still single, and life at Blatchmardean goes on in the old humdrum way, enlivened only by field sports, the delight whereof seems ever new to the earl's children. But rumour hints that a certain wealthy lordling, lately returned from a lengthened cruise in the South Seas, on board his trim steam yacht, a gentleman whose estate lies within ten miles of Blatchmardean, is desperately smitten with Lady Frances. He hunts with the Daleshire, and as he and Frances ride side by side for hours together three times a week, and have been seen to hob-nob in a sheltered corner, over Beville's sandwish-case and sherry-flask, it cannot be said that he lacks opportunities to urge his suit; so the prevailing opinion is that there will be a wedding at the castle by-and-by, when the close of the hunting season gives people time to think of such minor details in the business of life.

THE END.

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